

THE RULING RACE



*A History of American
Slaveholders*



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that characterized the slaveholding class as a whole. Instead, it was the paternalists' peculiar fate to agonize over the failure of the vast majority within the slaveholding class to live according to the precepts of their anachronistic ideal.

If different masters manifested varying degrees of guilt, few escaped it entirely, for the elements of psychological conflict were intrinsic to slaveholding culture. But that culture also produced a secular ideology that explicitly repudiated the suggestion that slaveholding was immoral. Grounded in the historical and material experiences of the master class, this ideology contained a major ambiguity of its own: the more slaveholders glorified success, the more they feared failure. Thus did their secular ideology reinforce the slaveholders' moral dilemma: To succeed was to risk one's soul; to fail was a disgrace.

Chapter 5



Freedom and Bondage: Politics, Ideology, and the Implicit Defense of Slavery

SLAVEHOLDING WAS THE SYMBOL OF success in the market culture of the Old South. It was an ambition, an achievement, a reward for diligence, hard work, and tenacity. As one Louisiana master wrote, "A man's merit in this country is estimated according to the number of Negroes he works in the field."¹ And as widespread as slaveholding was, it was no mean goal. From the recognition of their accomplishment, the sense of having prevailed over innumerable obstacles, slaveholders fashioned a world view that informed their public discussion of slavery, and made freedom and bondage inseparable in their minds.

BECAUSE THE STUDY of slaveholders is a success story by definition, it is difficult to understand the fear of failure that was part of the culture of slaveholding. "What shall I say at the commencement of the new year?" Henry Marston, a Louisiana slaveholder, asked in his diary at the beginning of 1827. "Am I better than I was a year since? I answer without hesitation that I am not." Marston then asked for God's help so that he might prosper "and at the close of the year find myself better in every respect." Like Marston, A. R. Boteler owned

no more than ten slaves. A backwoods farmer in Shepardstown, Virginia, Boteler grew a variety of fruits and vegetables but seemed to get most of his money from cutting and hauling lumber. Nor was he a man at ease with himself. "My birth day—30 years of age!" he wrote in his diary. "30 yrs. & what have I done in all this time? — Nothing— absolutely nothing."²

There was enough failure among slaveholders to justify the concerns of men like Boteler and Marston. In 1842 William Mitchell Davidson's business in Waynesville, North Carolina, collapsed. All of his property—land, stock, and slaves—was sold at the sheriff's auction the following year. With his wife and three sons, Davidson moved off his homestead on Jonathan's Creek. For a year they farmed on rented land near Asheville, but Davidson was not satisfied. In late 1844, he sold everything he could not fit into a four-horse wagon and headed west. In Texas he leased more land and seemed to be doing well. But the region was sickly, his entire family was ill, and in 1846 Davidson died, never having recovered his losses of four years earlier. His sons remained long enough to gather the crops before returning to North Carolina.³

Slaveholding families were no more immune to failure than individuals. In Burke County, North Carolina, in 1820, the Greenlee brothers owned 184 slaves. A generation later none of the Greenlee heirs in Burke County owned more than five slaves. In the same county John Butler owned fifty bondsmen in 1830, making him one of the largest slaveholders in the area. But business reverses before his death left his widow without a single slave in 1860. Those who owned fewer than ten bondsmen in Dallas County, Alabama, in 1850, and who stayed there for the decade, were as likely to lose all their slaves as they were to end up owning more than ten.⁴

Slaveholders recognized the tenuousness of their economic security. Advertisements for the sale of slaves seized for back taxes appeared regularly in the southern press. Frederick Olmsted heard two men in the lower Mississippi Valley talking about an unlucky neighbor whose father had recently died. He had discharged his overseer and tried unsuccessfully to run the farm himself. "Finally the sheriff took about half his niggers. He tried to work the plantation with the rest, but they was old, used-up hands." Frustrated by the poor produc-

tivity of his remaining slaves, he "sold 'em all" by the end of the year. John C. Jenkins purchased a debt-ridden plantation and struggled to revive it after the panic of 1837 and the ensuing depression. But Jenkins himself signed two bad notes and after more than a decade he complained in his diary that he was "not yet out of debt by a long shot."⁵

Slaveholders often attributed their failures to the speculative credit system, which encouraged people to go into debt to build up their holdings. The "universal indebtedness" of Alabama farmers made Henry Watson's neighbors particularly susceptible to economic disruptions like the panic of 1837. In the depression of the early 1840's Josiah Hinds lost thousands of dollars when his mercantile operation in Mississippi went bankrupt. "I am getting tired of this credit system, and I think I shall change my plan of doing business," he complained, "neither credit nor be credited." Small farmers eager to become slaveholders frequently overextended themselves by taking up more land than they could pay for. "Many fail altogether, and quit their farms in about ten years," one land agent said.⁶

Those who analyzed their own failure, even those who were to prosper later on, usually blamed their immediate circumstances on the lack of capital. Alex Dortch left Virginia in 1845 and arrived in Arkansas "without one cent." For three years the country was virtually uninhabited, and Dortch wrote that he "could not more than support myself and my family." As immigration stepped up, he began to speculate in land but found it difficult to collect his profits. After five and a half years he still could not pay off the debts he had left in Virginia. "Could I have reached here with a few hundred dollars, I could have soon made enough (long since) to have paid off my indebtedness," he told his creditor in late 1850, "—but sir, you have no idea how hard it is to start on *nothing*, and I do hope *most sincerely* that you may never have it to try." Slaveholders were thus fully aware that success in their calling depended very much on the availability of capital. "Had I money enough I would turn cotton planter," a young lawyer wrote from Alabama in 1831, "but as I have not I must go to work some other way."⁷

The same message was stressed over and over again in letters from the West. Those coming to Texas "would do much better to bring

some money with them," R. C. Clark wrote to his family in 1849. "It is true that they can and a great many immigrants do get along without it but the want of money is felt more here than any place I have ever seen." In a published letter of advice to his son, a slaveholding father declared that "one of the greatest errors committed in farming, arises from an erroneous impression that this business may be undertaken with less capital than most others. . . . Like every other producer, he is obliged to spend money before he can get it back, and it is the height of folly to commence the business without sufficient floating capital, to meet contingent expenses." Even established farmers were distressed by the expenses of slaveholding. "Negro women at a thousand dollars is extremely high," James Torbert wrote in his journal in 1856. Though interested in buying, he hated "to give a thousand dollars." Six years earlier a struggling slaveholder in Georgia looked over his books and declared it "very doubtful whether I buy any men this winter" because the price of slaves was so high. "I had thought of buying several."⁸

The difficulty of maintaining an economic foothold in a fluid and speculative society left slaveholders deeply conscious of the struggle that it took to achieve prosperity. "We have had some very hard years till last year," an Alabama master wrote to his cousin. "I think it was the best crop year that I ever saw we made." Joseph Thompson, a Louisiana planter, felt much the same way. "I have used every exertion in my power to do the best I could and for the three past years have made short crops," Thompson wrote to his aunt. "This year I have success in making everything in abundance in the way of crops. . . . I have I think worked hard enough to have some comforts around me." Thompson had no intention of ceasing his quest for ever more land and slaves. As with so many others, the struggle seemed as important as its outcome. "There is nothing valuable or worthy in the mere possession of property," one Southerner explained, "but everything in the effect of a prudent, rational, and just pursuit of it."⁹

Thus, hardship did not lead slaveholders to reject the ethos of individual achievement, but to justify and enshrine it. By a curious twist of thought, slaveholders emphasized the role of personal struggle in order to dismiss the same economic barriers that held them back for so long and continued to limit popular access into the slavehold-

ing class. The crucial need for capital, which frustrated so many, found its way into optimistic statements about widespread opportunities. David Meade wrote from his new plantation in Kentucky that "newcomers can be at no loss (if they have Cash) to secure an Estate to their taste in any part of this state." Even Alex Dortch, whose long years of struggle in Arkansas left a cynical tone in his prose, remained convinced that "Enterprising men here with Capital, would soon make fortunes."¹⁰

THE SLAVEHOLDERS' GIFT for turning disadvantage into virtue culminated in a progressive ideology that looked to a future of unbounded expansion, unprecedented abundance, and white supremacy. Physical movement and personal struggle, upward mobility and westward expansion, molded the minds of slaveholders and shaped this southern gospel of prosperity. Its rhetoric was religious and patriotic, its components were democracy and equality of opportunity for whites, and its foundation was unlimited westward migration and a vast supply of slaves. It was intensely individualistic, and it incorporated most of the features of what is called the "Protestant work ethic." It was the southern version of the American creed. However much he may have disapproved of it, Governor John L. Manning recognized the power of the slaveholders' ideology when he spoke to the South Carolina legislature in 1854. "A strong inclination to progress is a characteristic of the race which you in part represent and is, perhaps, the secret of Anglo-American ascendancy," Manning declared. "Its spirit prevails over the continent, and is continually hurrying us into new positions of theory and of government. It pervades to a greater or lesser extent, every State in the American Union, and is incorporated into its laws, religion, industry and politics."¹¹ Thus, a social class dominated by upwardly mobile masters successfully translated its own prosperity and patriotism into a distinctive slaveholding ethic with human bondage at its base.

Pundits across the South subscribed to the gospel of prosperity. Southern agricultural periodicals were cluttered with articles like "Gold Mines in Virginia," "How to make Farming Pay," "Manure is Wealth." Others were contemptuous of the widespread passion for

equal opportunity. "The white man who has to labor for his support, does it with an unwilling spirit," the *Farmers' Register* complained. "He sees the exemption enjoyed by others, and, if he does not fancy himself equally entitled to it, is too apt to repine at his lot, or migrate to some new state, where he will be upon a footing of greater equality with his neighbors. . . . All despise poverty and seem to worship wealth." But the same white egalitarianism that bothered the editor was an article of faith for most slaveholders. Antebellum rhetoric was infused with vigilance against creeping elitism. Only "the pride of honorable success" was justifiable, one writer insisted. "This is an important principle everywhere. In a republican government, where no aristocracy is supposed to exist, but an aristocracy of merit—it is imperative."¹²

When slaveholders pondered their success they turned first to God and gave thanks. The wealth and population of Mississippi had "steadily increased," A. G. McNutt noted in 1842. "For these manifold blessings we are indebted to the superintending care of an all wise providence." The contentious behavior of his fellow Georgians could hardly explain "the flourishing condition of the country," Governor G. M. Troup warned in 1827. "That the Republic is yet safe, and that the country is still prosperous, we are indebted more to Divine Providence, than to our own merits." Whatever policies Southerners devised to ensure their "present enjoyment and future prosperity," George Crawford advised, their eyes "cannot be too often and intently turned to Heaven for guidance and guardianship."¹³

As convinced as slaveholders were that the prime mover of their success was an all-powerful creator, they were no less certain that hard work and individual effort were the keys to advancement. Perhaps for this reason, personal expressions of the gospel of prosperity were frequently rendered in quasi-religious rhetoric. "If we take care of what heaven blesses us with," a Mississippi mistress warned her son, "we shall always have something to bestow on the needy—but negligence and extravagance always keeps one poor and dependent." She reminded her child that "Frugality and Industry are the hands of fortune." Edward Harden opened his diary on February 9, 1839 with a personal logo. In a box drawn at the center of the page Harden carefully inscribed the words "Industry, perseverance, prudence,

economy, temperance." To one degree or another, most slaveholders accepted the stern dictates of Harden's motto, although few ventured as far as his final stricture. This was, after all, an ideal. E. G. Baker, for example, "resolved" in 1830 "to pursue my business with a strict regard to honesty in my dealings with others—with humanity to my negroes, & a determination to live within my income, that I may have no temptation to do wrong.—And be enabled to have everything comfortable and prosperous around me."¹⁴

For many slaveholders, however, success was merely a spur to still more enterprise. As R. D. Spaight of North Carolina put it, "the increased value of the fruits of agriculture afford such ample remuneration to labor, as to give unexampled prosperity to the country, and to stimulate the enterprise of our citizens." At the age of sixty-five, James Lide was "the most busy man you ever saw." A successful planter in South Carolina, Lide moved his entire family to Alabama in 1835 where he worked with youthful diligence, excited by the great "prospects before him." For Lide, success was not enough; the pursuit itself counted for something as well. Thus prosperity seemed to feed on itself. Excited by the immigration and growth he saw about him, the governor of Texas gloated in 1853 that "a spirit of enterprise and improvement is now abroad among our people." The most debilitating calamity could not contain the slaveholders' boundless enthusiasm. Poor crops and disease stimulated "vigilance and exertion," William Rabun noted, even as they reawakened the sense of "dependence on the Almighty Disposer of events, of which man, uninterruptedly prosperous, is too prone to be forgetful."¹⁵

For as long as there were land and slaves enough to keep their society "uninterruptedly prosperous," exuberance would overwhelm the slaveholders' fear of failure. It was no wonder that every piece of new land was looked upon as the site of future wealth and greatness. Slaveholders were forever declaring the discovery of the new El Dorado, a dream world to which they were unswervingly attracted but which they never actually found. And with bondsmen to work the new land the prospects were all the more exciting. "If we had slaves enough to cultivate all of the cotton lands in the state," Governor Elias Conway declared in 1858, "Arkansas, alone, could supply annually, the market of the world with as much cotton as has

ever been raised any year in all of the cotton growing states of the United States."¹⁶

Slavery gave southern whites enough prosperity to justify such hyperbole; it offered enough opportunity for advancement to allow them to feel comfortable with their gospel of prosperity. In this peculiar way, human bondage reinforced the slaveholders' devotion to the American way of life. Two years before the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, Joseph E. Brown reassured the Georgia electorate that "there has been no lack of provisions in the land. The laborer of every class has been able to supply his necessities by the fruits of his labor. The barns of the husbandmen teem with plenty for both man and beast. . . ." A Tennessee politician went even further. "The artisan and the laborer find ready employment with increased and remunerating wages, and everywhere within our borders the comforts of life are being equally and generally diffused. . . . Our civil and religious institutions and privileges are extended to all classes of our people and contribute greatly to their happiness and welfare."¹⁷

For slaveholders, none of this could have happened without bondage. Responding to the free-labor ideology of antislavery Republicans, the *Richmond Enquirer* declared in 1860 that "at the South, free labor is the main support and stay of the institution [of slavery], because where the two races approximate equality in numbers, slavery is the only protection of the laboring classes against the evils of amalgamation and moral degradation."¹⁸

THE GOSPEL of prosperity and the defense of bondage were inseparable in the minds of most slaveholders. But when they made explicit reference to slavery, masters drew also from an intellectual tradition that reaffirmed their faith in the destiny of the white man as the harbinger of global wealth. In the antebellum South, racism and the gospel of prosperity were joined in symbiotic relation.

Slaveholders, like other white Americans, indulged in most of the popular prejudices of their day. It did not matter in the least that most of the groups slaveholders disdained were represented in their own class. They did not like Catholics. "O what horrid beings they are,"

Sarah Fountain declared, "and how much to be dreaded." A Mississippi slaveholder wrote in his diary that "for the three last centuries, the influence of the Catholic church has been to retard the march of intellect and human liberty." Such religious stereotypes were not only applied to Catholics. Esther Boyd recalled that as a child on her father's plantation her "idea of Jews was that they were usually peddlers who sneaked around negro quarters to sell goods to negroes."¹⁹

In the Southwest, slaveholders disapproved of Mexicans. They "are as bigoted and ignorant as the devil's grandchildren," one Texas master insisted. "They haven't even the capacities of my black boy. Why, they're most as black as niggers any way, and ten times as treacherous." The wife of a Gulf Coast sugar planter believed that Mexicans were getting "so impertinent" that the Americans were going to have to "get together and drive them all out of the country." Native Americans were no more tolerated by slaveholders. "Their *characters* have *not* been misrepresented," an Alabama slaveholder wrote to a friend in Connecticut. "They are a degraded set with little of pride, honor or generosity about them." Timothy Flint reflected the thinking of many slaveholders when he wrote that Indians "have not the same acute and tender sensibilities with the other races of men." Flint believed that the Indians were most like "the negroes. They have no quick perceptions, no acute feelings. They do not so easily or readily sympathize with external nature. They seem callous to every passion but rage."²⁰

Slaveholders were thus accustomed to thinking in crude racial terms, and it was upon these assumptions that they rested their defense of black slavery. Most slaveholders probably never examined their racist beliefs critically enough to draw fine distinctions between cultural and genetic inferiority. Their casual remarks indicate that slaveholders had no trouble holding at once to environmental, religious, biological, and cultural explanations of black degradation. Few slaveholders ever bothered to offer a coherent racial defense of bondage in their letters or diaries. So ingrained were their racist assumptions that slaveholders were most likely to reveal themselves by recoiling in shock from the mere hint of racial egalitarianism or antislavery sentiment. Black equality was simply

inconceivable, a subject not even open to discussion.²¹

As early as the 1780's, Thomas Jefferson had suggested that the divisions between whites and blacks could "never end but in the extermination of one or the other race." Thereafter, slaveholders echoed his conviction in their repeated assertion that racial harmony was simply not possible in America. "Unless there is order and subordination kept up, amongst negroes," a Louisianan wrote in 1807, "they would soon be masters instead of Slaves, for tho they are black, they have as great a propensity to command and be tyrants as white people generally has." There could therefore be no racial equality, John Mills concluded, "for if the negroes were free, the whites would soon be slaves, or their throats would be cut." The same fear haunted antebellum slaveholders, and that fear was evident in their politics. "No man that reflected about the matter . . . could believe that the two races could ever live together in the same community as equals," a Virginia congressman insisted in 1848, "they never did anywhere, and never could."²²

Slaveholders frequently expressed their racism in words and deeds that had no direct bearing on the defense of slavery. They spoke of blacks in crude racial epithets. They burst into fits of denunciation, proclaiming their desire somehow to be unburdened of the need to live in any proximity with blacks. A Tennessee farmer and sometime slaveholder explained to Olmsted that highlanders were friendly and sociable because "there warn't no niggers here; where there was niggers, people couldn't help getting a cross habit of speaking." He went on to say that "he'd always wished there hadn't been any niggers here . . . but he wouldn't like to have them free. As they had got them here, he didn't think there was any better way of getting along with them than that they had." A slaveholder near Mobile, Alabama, told a British traveler that it was a "great blessing that we had no negroes in England, as he believed they were enough to destroy any country." Most commonly, whites spoke of blacks as animals, or at best somewhere between humans and beasts. Following the Nat Turner uprising in 1831, a southern editor called the black rebels "monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps." In a proslavery tract written twenty years later, John Campbell declared that "there is as much difference

between the lowest tribe of negroes and the white Frenchman, Englishman, or American, as there is between the monkey and the negro."²³

Alexander Stephens came as close as any slaveholding politician to articulating a racist defense of slavery. "As a race, the African is inferior to the white man," he told the Virginia secession convention in 1861. "Subordination to the white man, is his normal condition. He is not his equal by nature, and cannot be made so by human laws or human institutions. Our system, therefore, so far as regards this inferior race, rests upon this great immutable law of nature." If few slaveholders publicly carried the logic of racism as far as Stephens, still fewer publicly disagreed with his conclusions.²⁴

A purely racist defense of slavery was largely unarticulated by most slaveholders, and not because they questioned its validity or because their views were so universal as to require no explication. Black inferiority alone was simply not an adequate justification for enslavement. As many abolitionists noted, if blacks were as degraded as the slaveholders claimed, that only made bondage more objectionable in its exploitation of the weak. Instead, masters used their racism to construct other justifications of slavery.

Samuel Bass, a carpenter hired to build a new home for a Louisiana slaveholder, Edwin Epps, provoked his employer into defending what Epps probably never thought to defend. "What *right* have you to your niggers when you come down to the point?" Bass asked. "What right!" the slaveholder shot back, "why I bought 'em, and paid for 'em." For the free-thinking carpenter that answer would not do. "Of *course* you did," Bass conceded, "the law says you have the right to hold a nigger, but . . . suppose they'd pass a law taking away your liberty and making you a slave?" Epps scoffed at the idea. "Hope you don't compare me to a nigger, Bass." The carpenter remained unconvinced. "In the sight of God," he asked, "what is the difference, between a white man and a black one?" All the difference in the world, the slaveholder answered. "You might as well ask the difference between a white man and a baboon." At this point the argument had reached an impasse, for once Epps declared blacks inferior to whites there was no coming to terms. What is significant is not that Epps justified slavery on racial grounds, but that black inferiority was

not his first line of defense. For his argument to hold, his assumptions had to be racist, but his defense of slavery was primarily one of economics and property rights: he had bought his slaves and paid for them. A South Carolina master agreed. The slave's earnings "belong to *me*, because I bought him; and in return for this I give him maintenance, and make a handsome profit besides." That was the way most slaveholders preferred to look at it.²⁵

Thus, the slaveholders' chief defense of bondage focused upon the profitability of slavery and the white man's right to make money and accumulate property. "As an owner of slaves (and one whose income is derived almost entirely from their labor)," one master wrote, "I assert an unquestionable right to my property, and protest against every attempt to deprive me of it without my consent." A southern congressman sought out the philosophical origins of the right of property in man. "We go out of a state of nature into a state of society, to render certain our personal liberty, our personal security, and the right to acquire and enjoy private property," William O. Goode explained. Because "the right of property exists before society. . . . The Legislature cannot deprive a citizen of his property in his slave. It cannot abolish slavery in a State. It could not delegate to Congress a power greater than its own."²⁶ Here was a philosophical defense of slavery which was at once consistent with traditional American principles, amenable to the values of slaveholders, and directly relevant to the issues in the sectional crisis.

Yet in practical terms, property rights represented little more than the slaveholders' assertion of their intent to make as much money as possible from the labor of their slaves. Whereas white labor was difficult to hire, troublesome, and costly, "the slave can be well and plentifully fed for twenty-five dollars a year, and clothed for fifteen dollars." If the initial price was exorbitant, the slave was still a profitable investment as far as slaveholders were concerned. Fifteen hundred dollars for a man "was fully worth it," one slaveholder confidently asserted, "because he could earn a handsome income."²⁷

Slaveholders simply imbued this defense with their racist assumptions. "Slave labour is more valuable than free labour," one writer declared, because the "white cannot endure heat and labour so well as the negro." White men "don't like the work, and won't do it unless

they are compelled to," a western ironmaker reasoned. "You can't depend on 'em. You can't drive 'em like you can a nigger."²⁸

This defense of slavery was largely pragmatic, even though it rested heavily on the slaveholders' racism and the principles of private property. In fact, many masters expressed impatience with philosophical arguments about the benefits of bondage. "Slavery was justified by its results," a Louisiana master who owned one slave declared. "It was nonsense to say that Slavery was sustained for the benefit of the negro." To the argument that slavery uplifted and enlightened blacks one master responded by admitting that "our slaves is kept in ignorance as much as possible." Another "advocate of slavery" declared that if bondage was a "blessing" to blacks, "the sentence of slavery upon the descendants of Ham would not have been accompanied by a curse." To the assertion that slavery was a positive good, one slaveholder answered that it was "a moral evil" made necessary by the "condition of the negroes."²⁹

Those who were familiar with and amenable to the growing body of literature in defense of slavery found countless arguments at their disposal, but the more common themes revealed a reticence bordering on defensiveness. This was certainly true of the frequent claim that slavery was milder here and now than in older times or other places. "With regard to the situation of slaves here, I am of the opinion that there is no country where they are better treated than in the Mississippi Territory," William Dunbar wrote in 1800. At the other end of the South, just three years earlier, Maryland slaveholders were accusing others of particularly harsh treatment of bondsmen. Though the "blacks of Maryland are slaves forever," a French traveler wrote, "they have nevertheless, according to what I was told in Baltimore, some advantages over those of Virginia and the southern states."³⁰ In the nineteenth century, slaves in Virginia were said to fare better than those elsewhere; slaves in the border states were better off than those in the Deep South; bondsmen in the East, it was said, had an easier life than those in the West. No slaveholder was willing to acknowledge that the slaves were worse off where they were than elsewhere, for such comparisons were designed as defenses in the first place.

Equally self-serving was the assertion that slavery was milder

than previously. In 1836 the *Farmers' Register* claimed that in Virginia "the condition of negroes . . . has been greatly ameliorated." In 1849 *DeBow's Review* insisted that slaves "are better treated now than formerly." While it is probably true that antebellum slavery was generally less harsh than colonial bondage, there is no evidence that by 1849 the "improvement" in the slaves' condition was "progressing." If anything, slavery became more oppressive in the 1850's.³¹ And while there were certainly variations in the treatment of slaves, they had less to do with the state or region in which the slaves worked than many slaveholders claimed. The structure of slavery implied and required repression everywhere it existed. A cruel master or a difficult crop like sugar cane simply made matters worse for the slave.

When slaveholders pointed an accusing finger at other times and places, it was most often aimed toward England. Southerners had been blaming their problems on England since the earliest years of settlement. In 1676, Thomas Glover complained that Virginians were "so intent on their *Tobacco Plantations* that they neglect all other and more Noble improvements. . . . From their planting Tobacco they find the greatest encouragement from England, by reason of the vast revenue it brings into the Exchequer." The Reverend Peter Fontaine of Westover Church, who in 1757 bequeathed nineteen slaves to his heirs, defended black bondage to his inquisitive European relatives by noting that Africans enslaved and sold each other, and by asserting that the Virginia assembly had repeatedly tried to discourage the slave trade but was always overruled by Parliament. But mostly Fontaine blamed slavery on "that stinking and, in itself useless weed tobacco." By the revolutionary period many slaveholders had convinced themselves that England was responsible for foisting slavery on the colonies in the first place, and so were doubly offended by Lord Dunmore's threat to turn the slaves against rebellious Americans. During the early national period, British interference with United States commerce was resented by slaveholders as much as by other Americans. "We are too submissive to Tyrants!" one Virginia master wrote to his father. "Let us wage eternal war with all the enemies of our heavenly Country. . . . If our slaves attempt to make an insurrection, we must make awful examples."³²

England led the world—or so antebellum slaveholders believed—in the fight against slavery. The British patrolled the seas against the slave trade. England's emancipation movement had a strong influence on abolitionism in the North. The emancipation of British slaves in the 1830's affected areas relatively close to the southern states, and it coincided with a tense period in the history of southern politics. It also coincided with the British debate over the reform of the Poor Law, a debate that conveniently provided slaveholders with substantial evidence that free workers in England were often as miserable as southern bondsmen. By the antebellum era, then, slaveholders had a lengthy indictment of Great Britain, which they employed in defense of slavery. If bondage was criminal, as the Englishman said it was, one Southerner wrote, "the crime was long ago committed by his country and the necessity and evil (if any evil) has been put upon the South, not by themselves, but by his country." A British traveler in South Carolina was told that the English had "abolished slavery in the West Indies, for the sake of encouraging a negro revolt in the Southern States, and thus, revenging yourselves on America."³³

Post-Civil War romantics often depicted the Old South as a chivalrous society strongly influenced by the example of the English aristocracy. In reality, slaveholders frequently looked upon England with contempt. Any natural feelings of association Southerners had with Britain were "neutralized by a dislike of the abolitionist party in England," Charles Lyell observed. England's recognition of Texan independence was seen as an abolitionist ploy that "had done much to alienate the planters, and increase the anti-English feeling in the south." Indeed, "hatred of England" was a source of political capital for southern office seekers. The *Richmond Enquirer* accused "the aristocracy of England" with "abetting the anti-slavery movement in this country." Similarly, a candidate in Warrenton, Virginia, told his listeners, "We want no English liberty here, we are not indebted to kings and emperors for our rights. They were earned not granted."³⁴

Many slaveholders apparently believed that if it could be shown that British workers were oppressed then somehow southern slavery was justified. They would print an article on "Infant Labour in English Factories," one visiting Briton noticed, "and because this blot stains the picture of English humanity, therefore it is sought to be

inferred that slavery in America is no blot at all! Such are the delusions which prejudice leads men to practice." Because they were reluctant to attack the North for historical and patriotic reasons, much of the slaveholders' anti-English rhetoric was a diversion thrown down in frustration. As a defense of slavery the argument certainly came to little, unless it was raised to a theoretical attack on free society in general, and even at that it was still not much of a defense of bondage. Few slaveholders took the argument very far, however. A northern traveler listened as one slaveholder expressed his satisfaction "that our slaves are better off, as they are, than the majority of your free laboring classes at the North." When the Northerner voiced his doubts, the slaveholder quickly retreated to a safer position. "Well," he said, "they certainly are better off than the English agricultural laborers." Unwilling to attack the North, most slaveholders reverted to the more comfortable and familiar assault on Great Britain.³⁵

Yet anti-English rhetoric, like assertions of slavery's continuing amelioration, went beyond the needs of the typical master. Most tended to think of black bondage as a means to various ends, including racial subordination, individual advancement, southern prosperity, and American greatness. It was in the repeated expressions of the gospel of prosperity, not the abstract ruminations of southern intellectuals, that most slaveholders implicitly defended their peculiar institution.

RACISM AND THE GOSPEL of prosperity fused to form the prevailing ideology of the slaveholding class, but their pragmatic cast of mind hindered most slaveholders from committing their world view to print. It was in the arena of southern politics that their implicit defense of slavery received its clearest expression. In this way another major historical tradition—political democracy—became inextricably linked to the slaveholders' defense of bondage.

One of the things that most impressed and disturbed Sir Charles Lyell about antebellum southern politics was its assertive anti-elitism. "I can scarcely conceive of the ostracism of wealth or superior attainments being carried farther," he wrote from Alabama. In one

election the favored candidate conceded all of his opponent's qualifications but suggested that the man was simply too wealthy to be elected. "A rich man," the candidate said, "cannot sympathize with the poor." Henry Watson was surprised that politics was so much more democratic in the South than in his hometown of East Windsor, Connecticut, where only the most successful and talented citizens were awarded political leadership. "None of the *candidates* are men of talents. . . . They feel about to *ascertain* public opinion, and *follow* on," Watson complained. "They would consider it madness to attempt to *lead*, and never do it in anything, whether of consequence or not."³⁶

In New Orleans, a lawyer complained that the capital of Mississippi had been moved away from Natchez, the city "to which the richest and best informed citizens resorted, representing both the landed and monied interests of the state." "[T]he democratic party," he explained, "could not be expected to put up, for so many years, with an arrangement of affairs so reasonable and advantageous." So they decided to move the capital to Jackson, a "wilderness . . . in the middle of a swamp, accessible only by canoe. . . . This was welcome news; all might now be placed on a footing of equality, the spot being equally inaccessible and inconvenient for all."³⁷ There were similar decisions in other southern states to move the capital away from the centers of wealth, decisions that likewise aroused indignation along with broad popular approval. In actual fact, the motives for these moves were less than populist; they were not gestures to placate the crowd. Nonetheless, their symbolism indicates the nature of the slaveholders' politics.

In the nationwide movement to democratize state constitutions in the 1820's and 1830's, the southern states held their own and in some cases took the lead. The Alabama constitution of 1819, for example, was one of the most progressive in the United States, and it was not changed significantly in the reforms of the following decades. In the 1830's new constitutions in Arkansas, Virginia, Mississippi, and Tennessee, and amendments to the constitutions of Maryland and North Carolina all tended away from property qualifications and toward universal white manhood suffrage. The reforms were slower in reaching the older eastern states, but by the end of the antebellum

era even the constitutions of Virginia and South Carolina became more democratic. In most southern states there was persistent debate over the replacement of appointed officials with popularly elected representatives. "The interest of the people will always make the masses honest in the exercise of their civil rights," an Alabama politician said in 1833, arguing for the election of circuit court judges. "Misplaced confidence in demagogues and politicians by profession, may cause them to be deceived; but they are generally prompt to repair their errors."³⁸

All of these democratic trends resist simple analysis. There is no pattern of slaveholder support for or opposition to the reforms. In the Atlantic coast states from Virginia to Georgia large planters along the eastern seaboard openly resisted democratization, indicating a deliberate unwillingness to compromise with the majority to maintain their historic domination. Yet even here the democratic opposition was composed largely of slaveholders. In some of the largest slave states, Mississippi and Alabama for example, slaveholding politicians led the nation in instituting democratic reforms. Yet the state with the highest concentration of slaveholders, South Carolina, retained the least democratic constitution throughout the antebellum period. It is clear that slaveholding itself was not an indication of a conservative or democratic political outlook. Most slaveholders, like most Americans, supported democratic reforms that reduced the power of the oldest and wealthiest regions, if for no other reason than that most slaveholders did not live in those areas.

The slaveholders' adherence to the principles of representative democracy was established by the early national period and was reinforced by the conflicts of that age. In 1796 a Virginia slaveholder wrote of his fear that the "Aristocrats . . . would deprive the popular branch of the Government of its essential advantages" should the details of the Jay Treaty negotiations be kept from Congress. In the mid-1820's Edward Harden looked back to the philosophical conflict between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Where Jefferson "administered the government for the good of the people and to fix deeper and deeper the principles upon which it was founded," the Georgia slaveholder wrote, Adams "seemed to think his own and his family's consequence was entirely identified with and dependent upon a mag-

nificent and powerful government and according to those selfish principles were his principles and practices regulated and controlled." Thus were the lessons of democracy and tyranny taught to the children of slaveholders from their earliest years. At the age of thirteen William Lawrence already understood that "Tyranny is the mother of injustice."³⁹

The fear of strong, centralized political authority was widespread among slaveholders; they tended therefore to put their faith in the most democratic branches of government. More than one slaveholding legislator felt "strongly impressed with a sense of the duties owing by the representatives of a free people elected by their free suffrages." Increasingly, the South's elected representatives came to accept this view. Governor John M. Gregory told the Virginia legislature in 1842 that the only duty of elected officials was to carry out the wishes of the people. "If any other theory than this be adopted, all proper restraint over the representative is destroyed, and the people instead of being sovereign become the mere tools of political aspirants."⁴⁰

Slaveholding politicians paid constant homage to popular democracy. "Let the slaves of Europe and Asia bow the knee, and raise the timid glance to executive supremacy," the governor of Louisiana declared in 1820. "Here, in this great American democracy, the people respect first themselves, then their legislators, and afterwards bestow on their executive, judicial and ministerial agents, that countenance which their talents and virtues may entitle them to receive." A slaveholding politician in Kentucky told the state's elected representatives that they were "more honorable than Princes or Potentates. *You* act for the people with their consent; *they* oppress the people, in contempt of all rightful authority."⁴¹

The racist subjugation of blacks helped open the way to universal white manhood suffrage by silencing a potentially rebellious underclass of black workers. "In this country alone does perfect equality of civil and social privilege exist among the white population, and it exists solely because we have black slaves," the *Richmond Enquirer* declared. "Freedom is not possible without slavery." The editor framed his remarkable analysis as an assault on the English upper class: "The spectacle of Republican freedom and Democratic equality in this country, is an eye-sore to an aristocracy whose system of exclu-

sive privilege and arbitrary distinctions rests upon the false assumption of a right to degrade and oppress men whom God has made as good as themselves. The abolition of negro slavery in the South," he concluded, "would inevitably end in the ruin of the political constitution of the country."⁴² Thus, when they considered the relationship between American liberal democracy and black slavery, masters saw not conflict and contradiction but harmony and mutual reinforcement.

Newspapers throughout the South illustrated this symbiosis. "The more democratic the papers are in their general politics," James Silk Buckingham observed, "the more indignant are they at all attempts to make their coloured brethren as free as themselves." White democracy freed slaveholders to pursue their goals without political interference just as capitalism freed them from economic restraints. Most slaveholders could not separate their own material success from the freedom and opportunity afforded by their country. They clung tenaciously to America's revolutionary heritage, made heroes of its statesmen, and often cited their nation's history as the ultimate defense of slavery.⁴³

In this spirit James Monette named one of his slaves "America," while John Houston Bills named slaves after two of his favorite presidents, Polk and Jefferson—"that great apostle of liberty." Henry Marston was not the only slaveholder to see the hand of God in the workings of American democracy. On the anniversary of the battle of Bunker Hill in 1822, Marston spoke of the inability of Britain's "corrupt ministry" to resist divine ordinance. "The only free government on earth was about to be brought into existence by an enlightened and free people,—How dark and intricate are the ways of Providence?" Slaveholders frequently made the Fourth of July a holiday for their slaves. In 1827, John Nevitt, a Mississippi planter, celebrated Independence Day by relieving his slaves of their work at noon before going off to a barbecue with his friends. An Alabama master gave his bondsmen "a barbecue and a Holiday" on July 4, 1846.⁴⁴

Even as the sectional crisis intensified in the 1850's, many slaveholders continued to display their confident patriotism by celebrating Independence Day with their slaves. In 1856 the celebration lasted

several days on Mary Bateman's Mississippi plantation because it coincided with the marriages of two slave couples. A Louisiana master released his slaves from work on July 4 in 1856, 1859, and 1860. The erosion of unionist sentiment in both the North and the South did cause some slaveholders to bemoan the lack of patriotic "spirit" among the people. But if the sectional conflict made it difficult for them to continue to celebrate the Fourth of July, it was not because slaveholders had abandoned their devotion to the principles of liberal democracy. Nor had slaveholders become aware of any glaring inconsistency between their political principles and their practices.⁴⁵

Most slaveholders had long since rationalized their devotion to slavery and freedom in the same way that Northerners justified their own discriminatory practices against blacks. When asked if all men were created "free and equal as the Declaration of Independence holds they are," a Louisiana slaveholder answered confidently: "Yes. But all men, niggers, and monkeys *aint*." A Virginia congressman was less crude but no less adamant. To say that the Declaration of Independence was implicitly antislavery "virtually brands Washington a hypocrite," he declared. In fact, the document was written and signed by slaveholders who were among the great revolutionary heroes and who represented Virginia's "noblest and most gifted sons." There was, he concluded, "no ingenuity which could torture the Declaration of Independence into having the remotest allusion to the institution of domestic slavery." Alexander Stephens did not disagree. Indeed, because he recognized that slavery in a democratic society represented "a peculiar phase of republican civilization and constitutional liberty," Stephens was all the more impressed by the legacy of the Founders. They had established, he declared, "the first great principles of self-government by the governing race."⁴⁶

THE MAJORITY of southern politicians were aspiring non-slaveholders and upwardly mobile masters whose success was earned rather than bequeathed, and who transformed their personal histories into a middle-class politics that was as devoted to liberal democracy as it was to black slavery. From the humblest county courtroom to the most impressive statehouse, slaveholders dominated southern politics in

numbers well beyond their proportion in the population. The nature of that domination and the tone it imparted to antebellum politics reveals how traditional American values sustained the authority of the slaveholding class.

One of the most powerful political officials in the Old South was the magistrate of the county court. Although persistent reform efforts weakened their authority in many states, county courts in some areas remained, as one Southerner wrote, "the most powerful branch of the judiciary, capable of exerting a greater influence than all others." The county courts in Kentucky controlled local patronage appointments, adjudicated probate conflicts, disposed of orphans, administered poor laws, granted ferry franchises, levied and collected taxes to build roads and canals, and tried slave manumission cases. Nearly three out of four of these judges were slaveholders in Kentucky counties where only one out of three heads of families held slaves. The political power of the slaveholders was reflected among southern governors as well. Between 1850 and 1860 every southern governor for whom adequate biographical information can be obtained was a slaveholder.⁴⁷

In the wake of democratic reform, however, southern governors had little real power, and the authority of the local courts was checked. The focus of politics was concentrated on the state legislatures. In 1860, slaveholders held the majority of seats in every southern legislature except those of Missouri and Arkansas. In Alabama and the Carolinas over seventy-five percent of the legislators owned slaves.⁴⁸ Even though a majority of Southerners in most Deep South states probably had a material interest in slavery, masters still held political office in unrepresentatively large numbers. Nevertheless, it is significant that in 1860 large slaveholders—planters with more than twenty bondsmen—held the majority of the seats in only one state legislature, South Carolina's. The slaveholding legislators held more bondsmen on average than their slaveholding constituents, but most were not planters. In fact, small slaveholders together with non-slaveholders held clear and sometimes overwhelming majorities in all but one southern legislature in the 1850's.

The middle-class orientation of southern politics is indicated by the inordinate power of slaveholding lawyers. They dominated the

county courts in every southern state. In the upper South, twenty-three out of thirty governors were lawyers as well as slaveholders. Though less conspicuous in the more democratic state legislatures, lawyers and other slaveholding professionals were still over-represented. In Alabama, where less than one percent of the free white males were practicing attorneys, twelve percent of the men in the House of Representatives were lawyers.⁴⁹ If slaveholders dominated southern politics, slaveholding lawyers epitomized its tone.

Benjamin Fitzpatrick was typical. Born near the Indian territory in Georgia in 1802, with "but few advantages of education," Fitzpatrick nevertheless was trained in the law and admitted to the Alabama bar. He settled in Autauga (later Elmore) County when the area was barely more than a frontier. He prospered and in the 1830's began making regular purchases of land and slaves. Fitzpatrick became one of the wealthiest planters in the state and spent the rest of his life enhancing his already substantial wealth. Inevitably his politics were shaped by his experience. In 1843, in his second inaugural address as Governor of Alabama, Fitzpatrick recited a philosophy that incorporated the slaveholders' gospel of prosperity within the principles of enlightened liberalism. "Reflection and experience" had confirmed Fitzpatrick's devotion to the republican tradition of state sovereignty "as the great bulwark of popular liberty [and] equality of rights and privileges among all free citizens. . . . Freedom of trade, freedom of opinion, and freedom of industry, are the birthright of our free institutions."⁵⁰

If one man can be said to have represented the mainstream of slaveholding politics it was Andrew Jackson. He inspired more admiration among antebellum slaveholders than any living politician; in death his memory was cherished. As the British traveler, Charles Lyell, observed, Jackson's popularity stemmed in large measure from "his having risen from a very humble origin." This made Jackson not only seem more typical than his enormous wealth implied, it made him a symbol of the slaveholding culture of upward mobility. Jackson did nothing to discourage that image. He never once questioned the morality of slavery (he attacked abolitionists vehemently), even as he articulated a profound conviction that in a democratic society all men should be afforded every opportunity for individual advance-

ment unhindered by the arbitrary restraint of concentrated economic and political power.⁵¹

Jackson's influence on southern politics was overwhelming. In 1828 he received over eighty-one percent of the popular presidential vote in the eleven southern states, and four years later he was supported for re-election in the same states by an astonishing eighty-eight percent of the electorate. "D—n him," Robert R. Reid, a Florida slaveholder, wrote of Jackson in 1832. "He frocks and unfrocks at pleasure, but he is a magnificent fellow and the best constitutional President since the days of Jefferson." Slaveholders who disliked Jackson could not deny his popularity. "The Old General has . . . been on to see us," an Alabama slaveholder complained to a friend in 1833, "and you would have been disgusted and sick at heart to have seen the adoration paid him by all classes." On June 13, 1845, the Tennessee planter J. H. Bills recorded in his diary "the Death of Genl. Andrew Jackson, one of the greatest and best men." The following month Bills visited the grave of "the immortal Jefferson," George Washington's home at Mt. Vernon, the nation's capital, and the Bunker Hill monument at Boston. After fourteen years, on the eve of the Civil War, the patriotic slaveholder was still inspired by Andrew Jackson's legacy. His memory "is fresh and green in the minds of all classes—his faults are all forgotten and his great virtues lauded by all classes of the community."⁵²

Among slaveholders, Jackson's most ardent opponents came largely from a small group of wealthy planters in the oldest areas of the South—eastern Virginia, lowcountry South Carolina, Natchez, Mississippi. Inspired by their distaste for democracy, they supported the Whig party or none at all. It is symptomatic of their minority standing within the slaveholding class that anti-Jackson planters found refuge in a political organization that seemed more a coalition of the disgruntled than an ideologically unified party. The Whigs in the South survived on the strength of local issues and local personalities; they appealed to an unlikely constituency of established planters, city dwellers, and nonslaveholders, all for different reasons. Through the 1830's and 1840's, this coalition proved strong enough to sustain a potent opposition to the Democratic party across the South. Yet it was altogether fitting that the Whig party, born in a blaze of states'

rights rhetoric, should die in the name of unionism twenty years later. For the only Whig principle that consistently attracted anti-Jackson planters was a studied resistance to the democratic impulse. Most slaveholders, including the majority of planters, had no need for such a philosophy.⁵³

In Jackson's wake, southern politicians quickly learned to connect their devotion to freedom to the defense of slavery. As he scanned the newspapers of Athens, Georgia, James Silk Buckingham noticed that "here, as elsewhere, the Democrats accuse the Whigs of being favourable to Abolition; and take especial merit to themselves, as the champions of liberty, though they are the exclusive advocates and defenders of the institution of domestic slavery!" What was doubly surprising to the English visitor was the fact that the Whig and Democratic newspapers were both strongly antiabolition. He concluded that the "literary taste of the South" revealed "a singular admixture of the most opposite principles; especially of the most unbridled democracy, and an earnest defense of the institution of slavery."⁵⁴ By the mid-1830's, slavery was the only unifying theme of southern politics. Whigs and Democrats who disagreed on such powerful issues as the Bank, internal improvements, and democratic reform virtually tripped over one another pledging eternal devotion to slavery, each charging the other with identical heresies on the subject. Under the circumstances, few slaveholders found anything in the American political tradition that required repudiation for the sake of slavery.

JUST AS THEY HAD COME to view political democracy and the capitalist economy as essential safeguards of slavery, masters believed that expansionism was in their own and their nation's best interests. Their position followed logically from the principle of private property and individual accumulation. "A man's slave is his property, so recognized by the constitution," A. G. Brown said in 1848, "and a citizen of Mississippi may settle with his slave property in the territory of the United States, with as little constitutional hindrance as a citizen from any other state may settle with any other species of property." In a society that viewed westward migration as an essential

element of upward mobility, expansionism became a central theme of slaveholding politics. At a local meeting in Tennessee called to discuss the Texas question, one slaveholder learned "that both Van Buren and Clay are opposed to Annexation. I say away with both of them." Like most masters, Bennet Barrow saw that expansionism was closely related to slavery. He believed that anyone who supported Henry Clay was a "traitor" to the South. "God grant he may be defeated," Barrow wrote privately. "The main question is slavery & anti slavery & Texas."⁵⁵

Expansionist sentiment had a long history among slaveholding politicians, and it was not simply the byproduct of crude economic materialism. Some of the Founders favored the expansion of slavery, hoping to dilute black influence on the developing white society. During the Missouri controversy, a Virginia editor echoed this position when he asked how proposals to restrict the expansion of slavery would remedy "the evil" of bondage. "Crowd our slaves into a smaller compass; increase their relative proportion to the whites; enlarge this kind of property in the hands of fewer masters—is this the way to encourage abolition . . . ? You only coop more of them into a smaller compass; and is this the way to insure their better treatment?" Through the last decades of the antebellum era some slaveholders continued to argue, with diminishing credibility, that diffusion of the black population was in the slaves' best interests.⁵⁶

Nationalist sentiment was as strong among slaveholders as any other group of Americans, and they viewed physical expansion as genuine evidence of the progress of freedom. The acquisition of Louisiana, a Virginia congressman told his constituents in 1804, opened to the territories "new prospects of increasing wealth, importance and national strength. . . . With the incorporation of that country into the union, they extend the principles of their own benign institutions of government to those spacious regions, where the mild and equal laws of a republic will thenceforward succeed to the rigid maxims of arbitrary power." The patriotic outbursts that appear regularly in the papers of slaveholders reveal the sincerity of their motivations. "The crushed Eagle of Liberty has found an asylum in this western Hemisphere, in America, the grand nucleus around

which the mighty affairs of the future must transpire," a Mississippi slaveholder declared in 1849.⁵⁷

Slaveholders were fascinated by the phenomenal growth and prosperity of America, and they connected it in their minds to the expansion and protection of slavery. One of the most forthright proslavery periodicals in the Old South, *DeBow's Review*, was also the most aggressively expansionist. "Westward is the tide of progress, and it is rolling onward like the triumphant Roman chariot, bearing the eagle of the republic or the empire, victorious ever in its steady but bloodless advances." It did not escape the attention of proslavery writers that the great mobility of slaveholders was largely responsible for America's remarkable expansion. "While the North has not extended her limits northward a single degree since the birth of, the Constitution," D. R. Hundley wrote in 1860, "the South has already seized on Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, and her eagle eye is now burning with a desire to make a swoop on Cuba, Central America, and Mexico."⁵⁸

By the 1850's, slaveholding politicians were so accustomed to resting the greatness of American society upon the protection and expansion of the slave economy that the prospect of abolition provoked images of unparalleled horror. The purity of white society was jeopardized, the very basis of individual advancement was threatened, national greatness would be subverted. The consummate defense of slavery, then, was the one that assumed the highest place and the broadest significance of black bondage. Its destruction fore-shadowed nothing less than global economic calamity. "So great has become the necessities of the world for cotton alone—which can only be produced, to any considerable extent, by slave labor, and in Southern climes," John Winston of Alabama warned in 1857, "that the suspension of involuntary servitude for a single year only, would cause convulsions in all the governments of the civilized world, the disastrous results of which, it would be beyond human ken to foresee." Few carried the slaveholders' logic further than James D. B. DeBow. The profits of cotton, he declared, have "gradually enveloped the commercial world, and bound the fortunes of American slaves so firmly to human progress, that civiliza-

tion itself may almost be said to depend upon the continual servitude of blacks in America."⁵⁹

FROM THEIR FEAR of failure and their pride of accomplishment, from their psychological ambivalence and the contradictions of their culture, slaveholders fashioned a spacious vision that put human bondage at the center of their private worlds. As if to overcome their own uncertainty, they expanded that vision into a political outlook that defended slavery as a bulwark of southern prosperity, American democracy, and even the world economy. "I think the United States fulfills a higher destiny," Adam McChesney explained in a veiled attack on abolitionists, "and can do more for freedom and suffering humanity in being an Asylum for the oppressed and home for exiles than in drawing the sword for abstract principles and against institutions that have existed in the old world for ages."⁶⁰ Thus did every expression of the slaveholders' gospel of prosperity become an implicit defense of slavery.

PART III



Plantations, Plebeians, and Patricians

