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# America's Civil War

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# A Nation Torn by War

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Today, their monuments adorn the grounds of county courthouses, city parks, and historical sites across the land—some towering over the seemingly endless rows of stone markers in peaceful military cemeteries.

Plaques recognize the sacrifices made by soldiers who fought in a bloody struggle that determined the course of American history. But this war was different from all others the United States had fought. This war, the Civil War, pitted American against American.

It would be the bloodiest war in American history and one of the most divisive. In all, the Civil War witnessed the deaths of 620,000 American combatants, largely from wounds and disease. (The breakdown for each side reveals approximately 360,000 Union deaths to 260,000 Confederates killed.) This staggering number barely falls short of the 680,000 Americans who died in all other U.S. wars combined!

In a nation of 30 million people, nearly every American living during the war knew someone who died in the conflict. Mothers and fathers lost sons, wives never saw their husbands return home, children were forced to grow up fatherless, and siblings mourned their departed brothers.

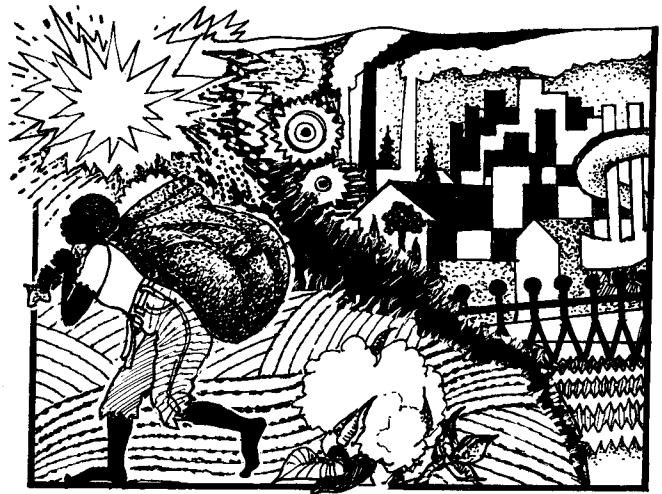
The experience of the Civil War deeply changed America. Personal responses are found in the letters, diaries, and other sources that have survived over nearly a century and a half since the war.

One soldier changed by four years of war was an infantry captain named Oliver Wendell Holmes. Writing nearly twenty years after the war, Holmes who was wounded three times during the conflict, (who in later life served on the United States Supreme Court) stated: "Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing."

Prior to the Civil War, Americans viewed the United States, not as a nation, but as a union of states. It was a political arrangement that allowed

the states to retain a high degree of power at the expense of the national government.

In the minds of many, especially southerners, patriotic loyalty was often focused on one's state or region. The great Confederate general, Robert E. Lee, led Southern armies because of his personal loyalty to his home state of Virginia. For him, his state came first.



The issue of states' rights was central to the war. During the 50 years between the War of 1812 and the Civil War of the 1860s, America had become a country of regions, each pursuing its own political, economic, and social goals. The war was about those differences—industrialization versus rural farms, modernization versus old Southern ways, free labor versus slavery.

Yet the war shattered many of these differences. Following Northern victory on the battlefield, the states were reunited. The question of whether America was to continue as a collection of powerful states or a true nation, forged in the fire of war, had been answered.

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## Review and Write

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In what ways did the Civil War alter the lives of millions of Americans who witnessed the bloody conflict?

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# A Divided People

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In 1860, the year southern states began seceding from the Union, Americans viewed their country as a collection of regions. For 50 years, the country had been spreading west, crossing the Mississippi River, the Rockies, and ultimately reaching the Pacific.

During these decades, the newer western region of the United States continued to be dominated by the divided culture of the East—the older America. Some identified with northern culture—its commercial and industrial interests, and prosperous family-owned farms. Others were inclined to the culture of the South, a largely agricultural region of small, yeoman farmers as well as wealthy plantations worked by slaves.

By the 19th century, the line dividing these distinctly different cultures hardened. Their profound differences in, as one observer put it, “manners, habits, customs, principles, and ways of thinking” were deep and longstanding and could be traced to colonial times. The people of the North spoke differently, ate differently, worked differently.

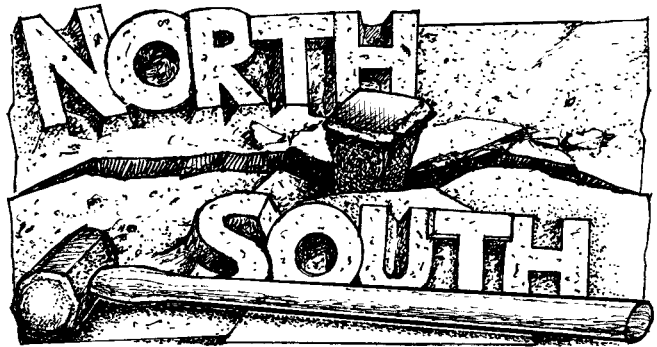
Even during the 1780s and 90s, New Englanders thought of the southern way of life, with its dependence on slavery, as backward, Old World, a plantation life that spent the profits produced by slaves on aristocratic living. Southerners in the late 18th century viewed northerners as people ruined by city living, dependent on paying low wages to a hard-working underclass of immigrants and the poor.

These two views were largely pushed to the side following the War of 1812. During the war with England, Americans—northerners, southerners, and westerners—saw themselves as a threatened people, whose existence was being challenged by the most powerful European nation on earth. Patriotism was the order of the day and the period produced potent symbols of American national pride, including the image of Uncle Sam and the song destined to become the national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

This same sense of nationalism animated Americans through the next generation as the

country followed its dreams of a settled West.

Northerners were moving into the prairies of Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, establishing farms that produced great harvests of corn and wheat. Southerners moved west, taking their slaves and opening new lands to cotton cultivation.



As slavery expanded, becoming a highly profitable labor system, the gap between southern and northern economic production widened, creating great friction between the two regions.

By the 1850s, the urbanized North had a population 50 percent larger than that of the South. Most of the important cities were in the North, as well as most of the new transportation systems—canals, railroads, roads, and stagecoach lines.

Yet despite these differences, there were significant similarities. Fifty percent of northerners still lived in rural areas. Both regions were experiencing economic growth and both had participated in the great reform movements of the 1830s and 40s.

Still, the institution of slavery—the harsh labor system on which the South increasingly depended—continued to drive a wedge between the regions, as southerners spread slavery to new lands.

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## *Review and Write*

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During the 1780s and 90s, how did southerners and northerners view one another? How did the War of 1812 reduce the intensity of those views, at least temporarily?

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# The Slave-Holding South

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The institution of slavery in North America was nearly two centuries old before the founding of the United States. The history of slavery in the Western Hemisphere, including North, Central, and South America, as well as the islands of the Caribbean, began shortly after the landing of the Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, in the New World in 1492. (In fact, the Portuguese had been enslaving Africans for a half century before the European discovery of the Americas.)

Records reveal that the first black slaves brought to the New World by Europeans were introduced by the Spanish in 1502. Over the following three and a half centuries, Europeans imported nearly 10 million slaves to their colonies in the Western Hemisphere. The vast majority of them, close to 40 percent, were shipped to Portuguese Brazil where they were worked to death on sugar plantations and in underground mines.

Other Europeans—most notably, the English, French, and Spanish—imported approximately 5 million slaves into their New World colonies, with the exclusion of the British colonies of North America, the lands which would one day become the United States. In that region, the English imported just over 500,000 slaves.

Nearly all the slaves imported to the New World from Africa, about 80 percent of the total, were brought across the Atlantic in the three centuries before 1810. The vast majority of the slaves, then, who were forced to work in the Americas during the slavery era did not raise cotton, but sugar. Since the British colonies of North America did not produce much sugar, the history of slavery in that region was different from other New World colonies.

While the slave economy of North America was never based on sugar, the need for a lucrative, cash crop was necessary to make slavery a profitable institution. In colonial America, that crop was tobacco. Tobacco was introduced in the small outpost of Fort James, later known as Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North

America. At nearly the same moment, slaves were introduced to Jamestown.

The first black workers brought from Africa to Jamestown arrived in 1619 on a Dutch ship called the *Jesus of Lubeck*. (Jamestown was only 12 years old at that time.) Twenty Africans were introduced to the colonial mix, including three black women. These first black arrivals, however, were not exactly slaves. The institution of slavery did not officially exist in the British colonies yet, and throughout the first half of the 17th century, the number of black workers in America remained low. As late as 1650, only about 300 blacks lived in the English colonies of North America. In colonial Virginia, in 1671, blacks comprised only one person out of every twenty of the non-Indian population.

Some blacks worked as indentured servants, workers bound to serve a master for a certain number of years, typically seven, then released and freed. Some owned their own land and even had their own black workers. Between the 1620s and the 1670s, black and white workers labored in the same tobacco fields, lived in the same housing, and were relatively equal.

A large number of available indentured servants—poor, young, white workers—provided an adequate work force without a significant reliance on black workers. However, by the latter decades of the 17th century, the pool of indentured servants was dwindling. In place of these laborers, British colonists turned increasingly to black slavery.

In 1662, in Virginia, the law stipulated that the children of black female servants would be held as servants for their entire lives. Developing along parallel lines was a strong conviction that blacks were inferior to whites. American slavery and racism were firmly in place two centuries before the Civil War.

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## Review and Write

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What changes in colonial America brought about the creation of British colonial slavery?