

Social Groups of Antebellum South Carolina

The elite were the wealthy, upper class, planter aristocracy who were land rich. The elite owned 20 or more slaves and attained their wealth from the growing and sale of the cash crops, cotton and rice. Although the elite had lived only along the coast in colonial times, by the antebellum period they lived in the midlands and the upstate as well. The children of the elite were often educated by private tutors or at private schools in South Carolina and abroad. The elite had greater political power and influence in the state because of their wealth and social standing and made laws that protected their interests, especially their interests in slavery.

The middle class were tradesmen, merchants, shopkeepers, physicians and attorneys, and could easily earn a living during prosperous economic times. They were most likely to live in cities and towns and had some political and social influence in their neighborhoods. They may have owned a few slaves to do household chores. Children of the middle class were taught to read and write and might pursue a profession like their fathers.

The lower class were unskilled and uneducated and often landless. Their job prospects were very limited. Those who could afford to hire them preferred to use slave labor. Often lower class people squatted on a piece of land and engaged in subsistence farming. Children of the lower class were uneducated as there were no public schools and their parents were also uneducated and needed the children to work. They had little social or political influence.

Independent farmers owned small farms which they worked themselves with the aid of family members. Some independent farmers owned a few slaves but worked side by side with them in the fields. The children of independent farmers might be educated at home. The majority of farming in the state, especially in the upstate, was done by independent farmers. As independent farmers were more successful in growing cash crops and became more prosperous, they bought more slaves and increased their social and political standing. Some even became members of the elite. At the time of the Civil War not all white South Carolinians owned slaves.

Free African Americans usually had a particular skill, such as carpentry, or a talent, such as music making. This skill led them to be hired out by their masters. Some were allowed to keep a portion of the money they earned from being hired out which they saved to buy their freedom. Others had been given their freedom by a master for some special deed or service, although this became much less likely (and illegal) after the slave revolt of the early 1830's. Their skill or talent allowed them to earn a living in the towns or cities of the South. Others were independent farmers. Many stayed in the region because they had family members who were still enslaved. They worked to earn money to buy the freedom of wives and children. The children of freed African Americans might be taught to read and write at home but there were no public schools

provided for them. Although free African Americans in the South had more economic opportunity than free African Americans who lived in the North because of their special skills, they did not have political or social equality with other Southerners. They had to pay a special tax and carry their freedom papers wherever they went. They lived in fear of being returned to slavery.

Enslaved African Americans were an unpaid labor source who were bought and sold and considered the property of their white masters. Slaves were allowed few personal freedoms and had to carry a pass issued by their master to travel from one plantation to another. Many enslaved African Americans were born and died on the same plantation where they lived in one-room slave cabins under the strict supervision of their masters. Others were sold upon the death of their masters, when they were disobedient or when the master needed extra cash. Families were divided by such sales. Slaves, including women and children worked from sun-up to sun-down in the fields or in the master's house. They were not paid but were given a few clothes and limited amounts of food by the master. It was illegal for slaves and their children to learn to read and write because such knowledge might allow them to escape their masters. Slaves who disobeyed the rules or tried to escape were punished, sometimes severely.”

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