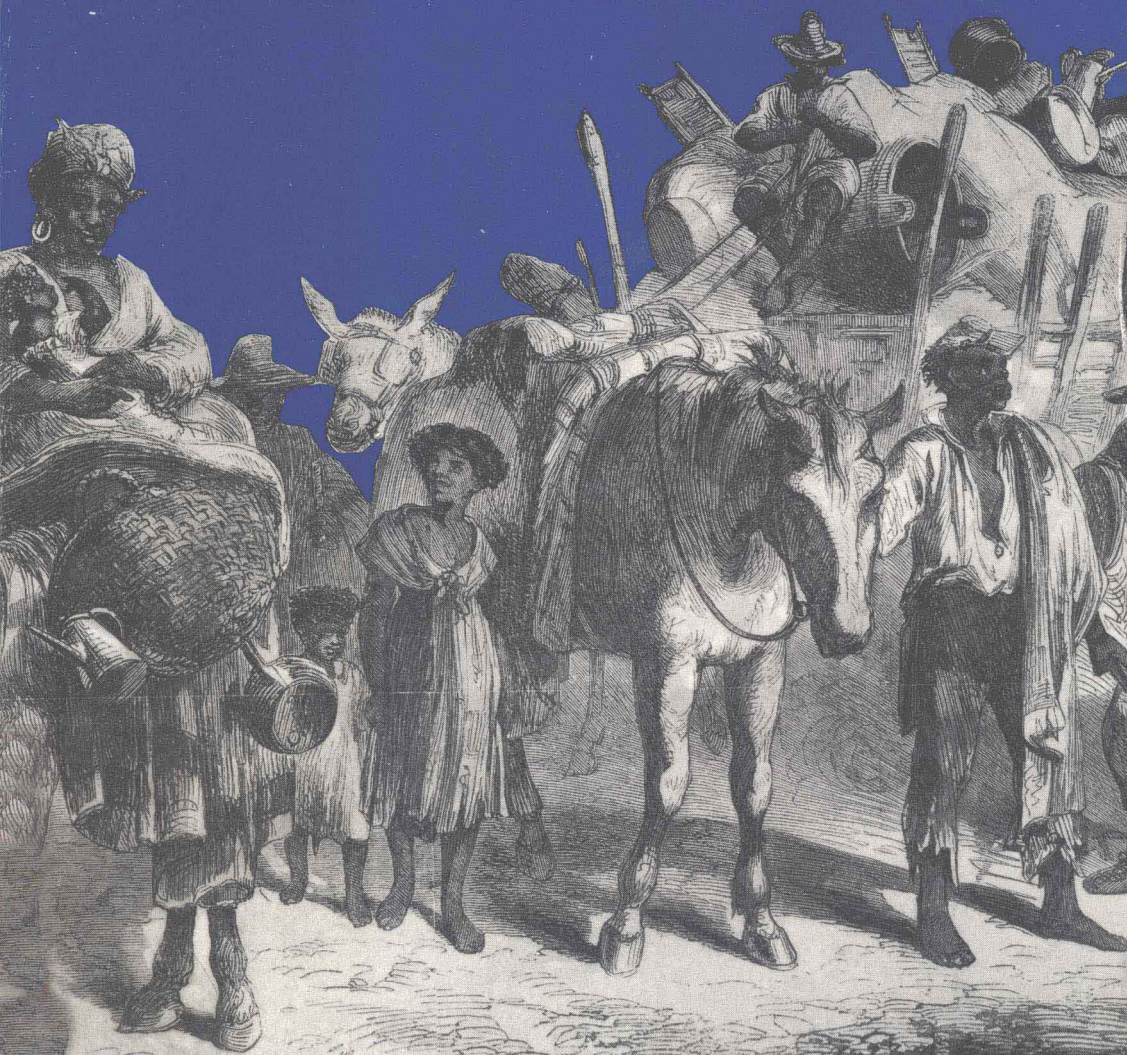# BARBARA JEANNE FIELDS

Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground

Maryland during the Nineteenth Century

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Introduction

Slavery and freedom had a long joint history in Maryland. It is probably true that, until emancipation, slavery in some sense defined freedom all over the United States. But in Maryland the intermingling of the two was so immediate and concrete as to give a unique flavor to slavery, to freedom, and to the dramatic historical moment when the one finally yielded to the other. The rise of two free populations in Maryland, one white and one black, challenged the political, moral, and ideological coherence of slave society. The growth of a white and largely free labor society, sectionally based and far outdistancing slave society in most conventional measures of social progress, signaled a political threat of which large slaveholders never lost sight. The simultaneous growth of a free black population hopelessly entangled with the slaves lodged a conspicuous anomaly in the heart of the slave order. Either development on its own would have warranted anxiety on the part of those dedicated to the preservation of slavery. Together, they kept slaveholders in a state of constant unease that swelled to a muted uproar and finally a panic-stricken crescendo with each successive failure of efforts to exorcize their dangerous potential. When the Civil War afforded slaves a chance to intervene in the situation openly and decisively, the potential became reality. The pages that follow tell the story of how slave and free, black and white in Maryland studied their parts for the final confrontation between slavery and freedom; of how they rehearsed them in a series of tense encounters; and of how they acted those parts when the great moment came.

The story goes beyond the death of slavery as an institution. Once slavery ceased to provide the reference point for defining freedom, a struggle ensued to determine what, precisely, freedom would mean. That struggle

most immediately concerned former slaves and their former owners. But redefining the relation of ex-master or ex-mistress to ex-slave also meant redefining other social relationships for which that one had provided the basis. The relationships between former free black and former slave, between former nonslaveholder and former slaveholder, between city and country, between one section of the state and another, between government and citizen: all these underwent upheaval in the revolution that overthrew the sovereignty of master over slave. Freedom had to be defined anew, not just for ex-slaves, but for the state at large.

This is a book, therefore, about slavery and freedom. But it is equally a book about the middle ground, that misty and elusive terrain that occupies such a place of honor in the geography of Americans' political ideology. The border states occupied both the geographic and the political middle ground, a circumstance about which some of their statesmen were inclined to feel smug. *Moderate* is nearly always a term of approval, regardless of the issue under discussion, and border-state moderates in the growing sectional discord of the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed a prestige wholly at variance with their effectiveness. Judging, however, by the immoderate events of their history, Americans have tended to regard the middle ground much as some uncharitable outlanders do New York City: a nice place to visit, but you would not want to live there. While their fellow Americans of the increasingly hostile sections often complimented the citizens (which is to say the white people) of Maryland upon their moderation, they sometimes did so with a rather condescending indulgence of which the recipients of the compliment, through obtuseness or intent, took no notice.

But once the Civil War had gotten under way, white Marylanders could not help taking notice. And in time, attempting to defend a middle ground that no longer existed, they revealed how insubstantial that ground had been all along. Moderation evaporated once loyal slaveholders discovered that they were playing for the same stakes as rebel slaveholders in the Confederacy—the preservation of slavery—and were losing regardless of their loyalty. Black residents knew the middle ground inch by inch from a perspective that white people could not share, for the peculiarities of border-state slavery added bitter occasions for suffering to those that accompanied slavery everywhere. Slave and free, black Marylanders expressed in action their contempt for the so-called moderate standpoint even before it could be fully defined; and they paid a heavy price, both during and after the war, for the privilege of doing so.

This is also a book about Maryland—not a "case study," with one state posing as a representative of the others, but the recounting of a profound

human experience important in its own right because it was profound and because it was human. I have admired some of the characters who appear in these pages, disliked some, been moved by others to triumph, disappointment, sadness, hilarity, and most of the other emotions with which human beings may confront the at once familiar and unfamiliar lives of their fellow creatures. I have tried to discipline my reactions to respect the historian's primary task of understanding historical figures in the context of their own circumstances and their own view of these. But I doubt that anyone could remain unmoved in some sort by the events I have sought to chronicle, and I doubt even more that many readers would care to waste their time over any historian who could. At the same time, these events inevitably raise a number of broad theoretical questions: concerning the nature of slave society, for example, and the social premises underlying the contest over the meaning of freedom. I have addressed these questions freely—usually by implication in the text and by explication in the notes— in the same way that they arise, as part of the story of slavery and freedom in Maryland. Readers will therefore find my analysis woven as carefully as I could contrive into the texture of a narrative intended to do justice to the human flavor, as well as the theoretical implications, of the material at hand.

In an effort to communicate the human flavor of the material, I have quoted from sources as faithfully as was consistent with full clarity. Errors of grammar and syntax, as well as highly fanciful spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, abound in the documents—from newspaper editorials and governors' correspondence to the letters and petitions of uneducated freedmen. I have made no effort either to eliminate these or to advertise them with the label [*sic*]. Appropriate editorial symbols mark the addition or deletion of material. Otherwise, readers may assume that quotations follow the original.

Sharp-eyed readers of the notes will notice inconsistencies in the information given in citations of certain Freedmen's Bureau documents. I have ironed these out as far as possible, but some unavoidably remain. In my days as a green and naïve researcher, my citations included much less information than I now realize is necessary. It was impossible for me to retrace my steps over each document at the National Archives. For those Freedmen's Bureau documents that I used from the files of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, or that I was able to match with documents in those files, I have adopted the Project's form of citation and included its file number in brackets. Where I could not do this, I have reconstructed as much information as possible from my notes and vowed to go and sin no more.

It is pleasant to be at last able to acknowledge those who have helped me see this book through to completion.

First I must thank the staffs of libraries, archives, and other repositories at which I have carried out research. These include the Library of Congress and the libraries of Howard University, Morgan State University, the University of Maryland, the University of Michigan, and Yale University; and the Archives of the Mill Hill Fathers in Baltimore, the Baltimore City Archives, the Maryland Historical Society, the National Archives, and the Maryland Hall of Records. I especially wish to thank Phebe Jacobsen of the Hall of Records.

For support by way of a postdoctoral fellowship, I would like to express gratitude to the Ford Foundation and the National Research Council. The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the history department at the University of Maryland, College Park, each in turn provided me with an institutional roost during my fellowship tenure. I have also benefited by support from the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Susan Bailey typed the bulk of the manuscript and, in her uncanny way, foresaw and dealt with a number of potential problems before they could arise. Paul Van den Bosch of the University of Michigan's Technical Illustration Department prepared the map.

I have received a generous helping of the kind of support from individuals which is difficult to acknowledge properly in written form. Still, let me try.

Herbert G. Gutman, in a chance observation which I came across as a beginning graduate student, first turned my attention to Maryland.

A number of people read this study in dissertation form. Anyone who has ever sweated out the interval between submitting a dissertation and receiving the readers' reports will appreciate the special gratitude I feel toward my colleague at the University of Michigan, William Rosenberg, whose enthusiastic comments were by accident the first response I received. David Brion Davis produced an especially detailed reader's report that provided welcome encouragement as well as valuable suggestions, and Professor Davis has continued over the years since to urge the project forward. The anonymous reader for Yale University Press (whose identity I have since discovered) also made detailed and astute comments, as well as providing warm encouragement. Eric Foner, John W. Blassingame, and F. V. Carstensen also read and commented upon the dissertation version.

Historians who have been privileged to use the files of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland will recognize

the enormity of the statement I am about to make: that I owe an even greater debt to friendship and collegial exchange with the editors than I owe to the extraordinary files they have assembled. The year I spent as a visiting editor at the Project was among the richest of my professional life. I had already learned (though never from him) that Ira Berlin was Yale's anonymous reader, and my year at the Project brought me more occasions to profit from his talent as a historian and generosity as a friend and colleague. Joseph P. Reidy not only bore patiently the brunt of responsibility for my initiation into the art and science of historical editing, but also shared his vast knowledge in Southern and many other areas of history. His suggestions have improved not just this book, but my work as a whole. Leslie S. Rowland, whose chair I occupied during my stint as editor, deserves special thanks. She waded in during the hectic final stages in the preparation of the manuscript and provided both substantive suggestions and life-saving editorial help. I owe a debt as well to those who succeeded me as gypsy editors at the Project: Thavolia Glymph and Steven Hahn. By sharing her unique knowledge of agricultural labor following emancipation, Professor Glymph has given me a great deal to think about in this and in other work. Professor Hahn read the manuscript and offered judicious and opportune suggestions.

Several colleagues at the University of Michigan read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. For this I would like to thank Thomas C. Holt, Louise Tilly, and Michael Geyer.

A number of good friends who cheered me on over the years did not actually read the manuscript but might as well have done so, considering the dividends I have reaped through discussions of their work and my own. Many more people fall into this class than I can mention by name, but I wish to call attention to three of them: Julie E. Saville, John Higginson, and Armstead L. Robinson. Equally entitled to acknowledgement in this respect is my sister, Karen E. Fields. Through sisterly encouragement and admonitions—stern ones, upon occasion—she helped push this project over obstacles in its becoming first a dissertation and then a book.

I have saved for last the debt that is hardest to characterize properly: the one I owe to my adviser, C. Vann Woodward. How should I convey the gift of history and of humanity that always came wrapped in the same package in that corner office of the Hall of Graduate Studies? Those who have spent time there know for themselves how much greater is the debt than any conceivable thanks; for the others, I can wish nothing finer than that they may one day have the chance to find out for themselves.

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CHAPTER ONE

Two Marylands: 1850

Maryland officially became a free state in November 1864. But the transition to free labor had been under way for decades. Slaves accounted for nearly one-third of Maryland's population in 1790. By 1850 their proportion had fallen to less than one-sixth. In 1790 Maryland already had the second largest free black population in the country (following Virginia) and by 1810 had achieved first rank, which it retained until the final abolition of slavery throughout the country. Between 1790 and 1810, while Maryland's slave population increased by less than one-tenth, its free black population more than quadrupled. Throughout the nineteenth century, the ratio of free to slave among black people rose steadily. By the eve of the Civil War, free black people were nearly as numerous as slaves.[1]

Maryland's closest competitor in this respect was Virginia, which in the first two federal censuses, 1790 and 1800, had the largest free black population. Even in those years, Maryland's free blacks came to a larger proportion of its total black population than Virginia's: the proportion for Maryland advanced from 7 percent to 16 percent between the two years, while that for Virginia rose from 4 to 5 percent. By 1810 Maryland had overtaken Virginia in absolute numbers, and by 1840 Virginia had fallen to a very distant second. In that year Virginia's free black population stood at 49,832 compared to Maryland's 62,136. The difference between the two in proportion of free people in their total black populations had become even more dramatic: Virginia's free black people constituted only 10 percent of its black population, while Maryland's amounted to nearly 41 percent.[2]

By 1850 Maryland occupied a class alone among slave states. Only Delaware, the small size of whose slave population made it incomparable to the others, had a higher proportion of free men and women in its black

1

TABLE 1.1

Ratio of Free Blacks to Slaves in Maryland, 1790–1860

Year	Ratio
1790	.08
1800	.18
1810	.30
1820	.37
1830	.51
1840	.69
1850	.83
1860	.96

Source: U.S. 9th Census, 1870, *Population* (Washington, D.C., 1872), pp. 6–7.

population.[3] No other slave state approached Maryland in either the absolute or the relative size of its free black population. In this respect the border states of Missouri and Kentucky resembled the slave states of the lower South more than they resembled Maryland (see table 1.2). In fact, to find free black populations similar to Maryland's in relative size, it is necessary to leave North America and turn to the slave societies of Latin America and the Caribbean. For sheer numbers, Brazil is the most dramatic example.

TABLE 1.2

Slaves as Percentage of Black Population, 1850

	Slave Total	Free Black Total	Slave Percentage of Black Population
Delaware	2,290	18,073	11.2
Maryland	90,368	74,723	54.7
Virginia	472,528	54,333	89.7
North Carolina	288,548	27,463	91.3
Louisiana	244,809	17,462	93.3
Kentucky	210,981	10,011	95.5
Missouri	87,422	2,618	97.1
Tennessee	239,459	6,422	97.4
South Carolina	384,984	8,960	97.7
Florida	39,310	932	97.7
Arkansas	47,100	608	98.7
Georgia	381,682	2,931	99.2
Alabama	342,844	2,265	99.3
Texas	58,161	397	99.3
Mississippi	309,878	930	99.7

Source: Calculated from U.S. 7th Census, 1850, *Population* (Washington, D.C., 1853), p. ix.

Estimates place Brazil's free colored population by the mid-nineteenth century at anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of the total black and colored population. It reached some 74 percent by 1872, at which time it numbered over four million. Though no rival to Brazil in absolute numbers, Puerto Rico was even more striking in percentages: by 1860 its black and colored population was 85 percent free. Closer to Maryland was Curaçao, whose free colored population came to 40 percent of its total black population in 1816, compared to 27 percent for Maryland in 1820. Even closer was Cuba, whose figure of 38 percent in 1860 approximates Maryland's 41 percent in 1840, at a comparable distance from emancipation.[4] In the British and French Caribbean—which differed from Brazil, the Spanish Caribbean, and much of the Dutch Caribbean in that slaves greatly outnumbered all other elements of the population—the free colored element still formed from 60 to 90 percent of the total free population.[5]

An important distinction, however, set Maryland apart from all these societies: the relative size of the white population. In the slave societies of the Caribbean and in Brazil, white people's share of the total population ranged from a small minority to only a slight majority: for example, 4 percent (Jamaica, 1844); 22 percent (Curaçao, 1816); 40 percent (Brazil, 1872); 57 percent (Cuba, 1860).[6] In such societies the free colored people could occupy a space that white people filled in Maryland. Free colored people formed a petite bourgeoisie—of artisans, shopkeepers, clerks, and small-holding farmers—of which slave society could make use for minor but necessary economic, administrative, and even peacekeeping functions that the white population could not have carried out unassisted.[7] As a result, free colored people came to have their own unique and more or less legitimate place in society.

In Maryland white people constituted a substantial majority at all times. They represented 72 percent of the state's total population in 1850. In 1810, at their lowest proportion within the period of the federal census, white people still accounted for 62 percent of the population. Only in the counties of southern Maryland did black people constitute a majority—and only just: 54 percent in 1850. That figure had remained the same since the peak of 1810, when blacks accounted for 57 percent of the population of the southern counties.[8] Maryland had ample whites to carry out necessary petit-bourgeois tasks. Consequently, free blacks did not occupy a unique or legitimate place within Maryland society, but instead formed an anomalous adjunct to the slave population. Though they constituted an essential element of the work force, their position in society was always problematic.

So far from using them to keep peace among the slaves, as happened fre-
quently in other New World slave societies (or, for that matter, in the great
Louisiana revolt of 1811), slaveholders in Maryland considered free blacks
a standing incitement to servile disorder and placed elimination of them on
the order of the day from the post-Revolutionary period right up to the eve
of emancipation.[9]

Why did the free black population grow to such proportions when
Maryland society had no comfortable place for it? The atmosphere of the
American Revolution, with its equalitarian rhetoric and its emphasis upon
natural rights philosophy, undoubtedly contributed to the surge of manu-
missions in the years following the war.[10] Religious scruples, intensified by
revivalism and given concrete form by the outspoken policy of Quakers and
Methodists, entered in as well, though strong antislavery stands adopted
early on were later considerably diluted in practice.[11] The importance of
religious ideas lay not only in the direct spur they provided to manumission,
but also in a certain residual respectability they lent to antislavery opinions
in later years, when the expectation of a gradual withering away of slavery—
popular in the first flush of Revolutionary enthusiasm—had retreated into
the mythology of the past. Geography reinforced religious and Revolution-
ary ideas, especially in the northernmost counties. A slaveholder in northern
Maryland in 1854, for example, believed that proper etiquette required a
degree of reserve in broaching touchy questions with a neighbor known to
be "exceedingly opposed to slavery."[12] Maryland sat, after all, on the border
of the movement that ended slavery in the Northern states in the years after
American independence, and thereafter sat on the border of free soil itself.
On their own, however, the ideological legacy of the Revolution and the
force of religious discipline do not suffice to explain the growth of Maryland's
free black population. Revolutionary ideology, revivalism, and evangelical
religion all touched other parts of the South without producing as dramatic
a result. Nor does geography provide a sufficient answer. Proximity to free
territory did not lead the border states of later settlement, Missouri and
Kentucky, in the same direction as Maryland.

Far more decisive were the fortunes of tobacco, the first staple crop of
Maryland slavery. The cycle of boom and recession in the Chesapeake
tobacco economy had swung around to prosperity again by the beginning
of the eighteenth century. But soon thereafter, long-term changes began
that would eventually supplant tobacco production in the tobacco-growing
portions of northern Maryland (parts of Harford, Frederick, and Baltimore
counties) and on the Eastern Shore. Heavy, if highly variable, demand in

New England, the West Indies, and southern Europe—and, in the later decades of the century, in Britain and France as well—encouraged the spread of wheat cultivation. By the 1740s tobacco production on the Eastern Shore had dwindled to the point that residents objected to paying public fees in tobacco. The Revolutionary War hastened things along, disrupting tobacco production and marketing. The abolition of the French tobacco monopoly in 1791 removed from the market a strategically important buyer of the inferior tobacco of the lower Eastern Shore, giving further impetus to a switch to cereal agriculture that had occurred more swiftly in the upper Eastern Shore counties. As the center of tobacco production moved south and then west, tobacco surrendered its dominant position in Maryland's economy. From 90 percent of Maryland's aggregate agricultural production in 1747, tobacco had fallen to 14 percent in 1859. Though prices experienced periodic upsurges and had even reached a new peak by the late 1850s, tobacco culture had become virtually confined to the southern counties of the western shore, the most backward region of the state, as the Civil War approached.[13]

The replacement of tobacco by cereal—in particular, wheat—cultivation brought about an important change in requirements for agricultural labor. Production of tobacco could keep a slave labor force more or less constantly busy throughout the year, with crop years actually overlapping each other. Wheat, on the other hand, required a maximum work force at harvest, but could not usefully employ a full harvest crew at other times. No extensive adjustments appear to have been necessary so long as wheat remained a supplementary crop alongside tobacco and corn: its labor demands could be reasonably well harmonized with theirs, albeit with some tense moments at harvest.[14] But once wheat became the predominant or sole cash crop, it made little sense to maintain a large slave force that could not be productively employed much of the time. Better to hire harvest hands, who could be dismissed when no longer required.[15] The retreat of tobacco and the advance of cereal agriculture in the longer-settled regions of the state thus diminished the need for a fixed labor force and created a need for a variable labor force at the very historical moment when Revolutionary and religious enthusiasm provided a spur to manumission. Moreover, the settlers who moved into Maryland's wheat-producing western interior, many of them Germans and many others migrants from Pennsylvania, had little or no slaveholding tradition: from the beginnings of settlement there, slavery played no more than a minor role.[16] Thus, the direction of Maryland's economic development lent an air of commonsense

practicality to antislavery ideas, while supplying sound reasons even for owners impervious to argument from moral, political, or religious principles to get rid of their slaves.[17] Slave society in Maryland might have ideological difficulties making room for a class of free black people; but, as long as agricultural renewal undermined the old tobacco-slave economy and new settlement favored the free labor economy, the free black population was bound to grow in prominence.[18]

Whatever may have been the special contribution of the Revolutionary atmosphere, the burst of antislavery feeling and activity that accompanied it ended abruptly. The most intense period was over by 1800, and the growth of the free black population settled down to a more routine pace.[19] From that point on, the extraordinary conditions of the Revolutionary era cease to be the key to the story; otherwise, why should Virginia, which partook of these same conditions, have lagged so far behind Maryland by 1850 in respect of its free black population? After 1800, internal development, not external circumstances impinging equally upon the other states of the upper South, account for Maryland's remarkable situation.

Like the United States as a whole, Maryland was a society divided against itself. There were, in effect, two Marylands by 1850: one founded upon slavery and the other upon free labor. Northern Maryland, embracing Allegany, Baltimore, Carroll, Frederick, Harford, and Washington counties, was an overwhelmingly white and free labor society, the only region of the state in which industrial activity had grown to significant proportions. Black people contributed only 16 percent of its population, and slaves less than 5 percent. Southern Maryland (Anne Arundel, Calvert, Charles, Prince George's, Montgomery, and St. Mary's counties) was a backward agricultural region devoted primarily to tobacco, though wheat production made inroads during the 1850s, particularly in areas of large and concentrated landholdings. The population of the southern counties was 54 percent black and 44 percent slave. Occupying an intermediate position, much like that of Maryland within the Union, was the Eastern Shore, comprising Caroline, Cecil, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, Somerset, Talbot, and Worcester counties. Like the southern counties, the Eastern Shore devoted itself to agriculture to the virtual exclusion of industry. Like the northern counties, it produced mainly cereals. It was neither as slave and black as southern Maryland nor as free and white as northern Maryland. Just over 20 percent of its people were slaves and just under 40 percent were black.[20]

In southern Maryland and on the Eastern Shore, slavery shambled

along in the lengthening shadow of isolation. Its gradual eclipse showed up, not in the emergence of a vigorous nonslave society, but in relative stagnation. White population either declined or barely maintained itself, many people leaving the state for more expansive prospects, while the growing free black population had to fit itself into the crevices of the slave system. Isolated on its chosen terrain, slavery turned in upon itself, dissolving slowly under influences more efficient to undermine the old basis than to create a new one. The dissolution occurred more slowly in southern Maryland, a reflection of the dominance of the tobacco economy. But neither in southern Maryland nor on the Eastern Shore was the dissolution of the old accompanied by the rise of a vital alternative.

Northern Maryland followed a different course, developing a way of life to which slavery was at most tangential. Its metropolis, Baltimore, presided over a hinterland that, in contrast to the pattern that stunted the growth of so many Southern cities, was not confined to slave territory. Not that Baltimore carried on independently of the slave economy. Varied services of marketing, processing, exchange of information, purchase and sale of slaves, and provision of food, supplies, and legal advice linked Baltimore with slave society in Maryland and with the rest of the slave South. To give only a pair of examples: 120 establishments in Baltimore in 1850 converted tobacco into cigars; and seven steam-powered factories in the city of Baltimore, another fifteen in Baltimore County, plus one in the Maryland State Penitentiary turned out an annual production of cotton worth $1,366,412. Nevertheless, Baltimore was never subservient to the slave system—at least, not economically. It rose to the status of a major city at a time when the tobacco economy was losing importance, and drew its initial impetus from the special though temporary advantages that war, especially the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, provided in the area of foreign trade. Large sales of grain to Europe and a brisk reexport trade in West Indian goods did not long survive the return of peace; in fact, Thomas Jefferson's embargo and then the British blockade of the Chesapeake Bay from 1813 to 1814 ended the wartime boom before the war was over. But by then Baltimore could draw upon a vast hinterland to the north and west, bringing within its orbit the Susquehanna region and the Ohio Valley. Baltimore even contrived to garner for itself a hefty share of the Ohio and Kentucky tobacco trade, even as Maryland's tobacco-growing counties were feeling the hot breath of Western competition: by 1860 Baltimore was receiving an annual average of 20,000 hogsheads of tobacco from the Ohio River region (compared to only 4,478 hogsheads as recently as 1840). Never