

# *The American South*

*A HISTORY*

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*Volume I*

WILLIAM J. COOPER, JR.  
THOMAS E. TERRILL

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THE AMERICAN SOUTH  
A History  
Volume I

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# Preface



Our ambition has been to write a comprehensive history of the South from colonial times to the present. *The American South: A History* underscores our belief that it is impossible to divorce the history of the South from the history of the United States. Much of *The American South* therefore emphasizes the complex interaction between the South as a distinct section and the South as an inescapable part of the United States. The resulting tension has often propelled section and nation toward collision.

We develop major themes that give coherence and meaning to southern history from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, with attention to crucial changes over time. We stress the dynamics of the relationship between black and white southerners that have shaped the southern experience for more than three centuries. While for much of its history the South was overwhelmingly rural and agricultural, it is now increasingly urban and industrial. We describe each of these worlds and trace the connections among them. We also treat thoroughly the issue of social class, which, along with race, has been central in southern history, and we discuss the great wars—especially the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War II—that have so powerfully influenced the history of the section and the nation. At least from the time of the Revolution southerners have felt a strong urge to explain and defend themselves and their section. We investigate that urge and chart its results.

In order to write a full history of the South, we start with the colonial era. We focus on the British colonies because those who settled here—both black and white, with their institutions, values, and experiences—fundamentally formed what would come to be called the South. The first half of the book covers the more than two and a half centuries between the first permanent settlement in Virginia in 1607 and the Civil War, in which the South, as the Confederate States of America, attempted to establish its independence. The second half of the book concentrates on the momentous decades from the defeat of the southern Confederacy in 1865 to our own time.

In recent years scholarship in southern history has grown tremendously and been profoundly reshaped. Significantly revised interpretations based on wide-ranging research and altered perspectives have transformed how histori-

ans understand traditional subjects, such as political leadership and plantation economics. At the same time, historians have come to give previously neglected topics such as the slave family, blacks since slavery, southern industrial workers, and women a great deal more attention. We have strived to incorporate this outpouring of scholarship to present a fresh look at the whole of southern history. We conclude the book with a substantial bibliographical essay that provides a guide to the major literature on the history of the South.

While working on this book we received the generous assistance of students, colleagues, and friends. Several former graduate students at Louisiana State University and one still enrolled helped enormously: Bradley Bond, Ralph Eckert, Kenneth Startup, and especially Eric Walther. At the University of South Carolina, James A. Dunlap, III did likewise. Colleagues and friends who were willing to listen, to suggest, and to read include Robert Becker, Keen Butterworth, David L. Carlton, Lacy K. Ford, Jr., Gaines M. Foster, Michael F. Holt, David Katzman, Daniel Littlefield, David W. Murphy, Sydney Nathans, Paul Paskoff, George Rable, Charles Royster, Allen H. Stokes, Jr., Robert M. Weir, R. Jackson Wilson, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Without their counsel and expertise this would surely be a lesser book. Marlene LeBlanc handled arduous typing duties with good cheer. Polly Brown, Philip C. Cockrell, and Joanne McMullen also helped in numerous ways with the preparation of the manuscript, as did W. Lynn Shirley, who designed some of the maps.

Since the start of work on this book we have been associated with three superb editors. Jane Garrett deserves out thanks. David Follmer initiated this project; he, along with Jack Wilson, brought us together and started us down the road that led to this book. From David, Christopher Rogers inherited us and the history of the South. Chris has been unswerving in his support of our effort, and extraordinarily patient. He coped magnificently with postponements and missed deadlines. He kept faith with us.

Patricia and Sarah also kept the faith and, for a far longer time than any wives should have to, they heard about southern history in general and this discussion of it in particular.

All those people and scores more unnamed scholars of the southern past whose research and writing illuminated our path have assisted us immensely. This book is ours, however, and we accept full responsibility for it.

*William J. Cooper, Jr.  
Thomas E. Terrill*

# Prologue

## *The Enduring South*

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The South, Wilbur Cash wrote in his celebrated book *The Mind of the South* (1941), is “not quite a nation within a nation but the next thing to it.” The sources of that enduring distinctiveness are many and complex. As early as 1750, a generation before Americans went to war against Great Britain to secure their political independence, clear differences distinguished the southern colonies from the northeastern and middle Atlantic colonies. Those differences persisted after the American Revolution and intensified during the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1860, though the similarities among the states remained powerful, the gap between the South and the rest of the country had grown into a chasm that seemingly could not be bridged by any compromise. The American South had become synonymous, though not entirely identical, with plantations, cotton, and black slavery—with places such as Davis Bend, Mississippi.

Thirty-odd miles south of Vicksburg, Mississippi, Davis Bend was a fertile peninsula formed by a large horseshoe curve of the Mississippi River. Today, more than four generations since the flood tides of war swept over it, Davis Bend and the people who lived there in 1860 provide a useful focus for examining southern identity before that time and since. The bend got its name from Joseph Davis, a large landholder in the area and the elder brother of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy. He had prospered as a lawyer in Natchez, Mississippi, a booming cotton and commercial center that served as the capital of Mississippi until 1817, when the territory became a state. He was intensely interested in politics, and when his youngest brother, Jefferson, developed an interest in a political career, he frequently turned to Joseph for advice.

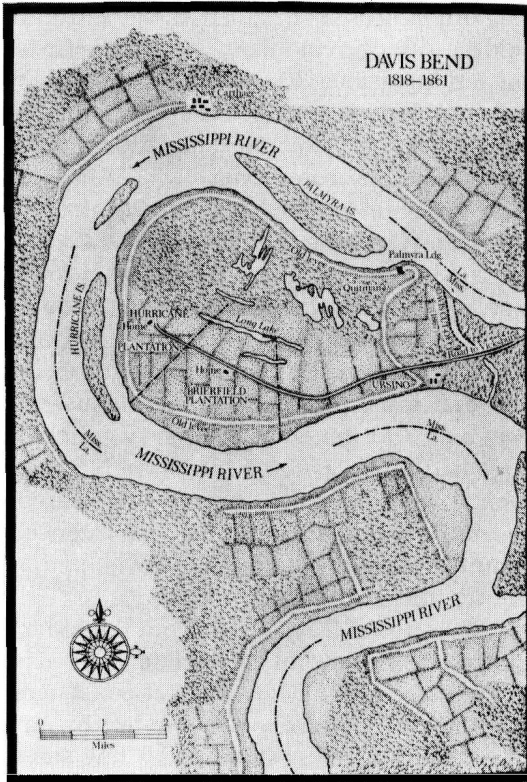
Joseph Davis bought most of the 11,000 acres of Davis Bend from the federal government in 1818 and obtained the rest from several frontier farmers who had been the first whites to settle and clear the area. Davis sold off 6,000 acres of the bend to friends. Then in 1827, when he was forty-two, he left his law practice and with his sixteen-year-old bride, three daughters, and a few slaves he had inherited from his father established a plantation at the bend. Eight

years later, Jefferson Davis started a plantation of his own on 800 acres that Joseph had given him.

During the next three decades, Joseph Davis became a very wealthy man. In 1860 he was one of only nine planters in Mississippi with more than 300 slaves. He had a spacious mansion and almost a village of outbuildings, which included a cluster of slave cottages. To protect his holdings from flooding by the great river that almost encircled it, Davis and the other leading planters at Davis Bend built a mile-and-a-half-long levee that was six to eighteen feet high. Davis's twenty-five-acre flower garden was so spectacular that passengers disembarked from river steamboats to tour it. No doubt the tourists knew they were in the American South and that their host was a southerner. Neither Davis nor his plantation was typical of the South, though both were typical of what many southerners aspired to.

Davis's background did resemble that of a majority of antebellum southerners. His grandfather, son of a Welsh immigrant, was born in Philadelphia around 1730 and moved as a young man to the colonial South, first to South

DAVIS BEND, MISSISSIPPI (New York Public Library, Schaumberg Collection)





Carolina, then to Georgia. Joseph's father, Samuel, fought in the American Revolution, married a South Carolina woman he met while serving in the military, and took up farming near Augusta, Georgia, on land the state had given him for his military service. The family moved to Kentucky in 1793, a year after the territory had become a state, and there they produced two of that region's principal products: tobacco and horses. In 1810 the Davis family moved again, still pursuing the frontier; eventually they settled in southwestern Mississippi, an area that only nine years earlier had been ceded by the Choctaws. Settlers such as the Davises kept continual pressure on Indians to vacate western land so that whites could safely settle there. In the 1830s the Choctaws and Chickasaws gave up the last of their holdings in Mississippi and moved west beyond Arkansas to what was called Indian Territory. Whites later followed the Indians, took over most of their land, and created the state of Oklahoma; the name means "home of the Indian."

On their newly acquired land in Mississippi the Davises cultivated cotton as their major cash crop. To clear the land and plant, cultivate, and harvest the cotton, they relied on their own labor and the handful of slaves Samuel had bought. Improving fortunes allowed them to build a substantial home graced by a veranda—a large step up from the four-room log cabin the family had occupied in Kentucky. The family of Samuel Davis strongly resembled the great majority of whites who populated the South from its earliest years to the Civil War: yeoman farmers who pushed south and west for more than a century and a half in search of cheap, fertile soil, frequently acquiring a few slaves, always bending their backs as they tried to improve their lot and station.

Their pursuit of the southern version of the American dream propelled such families from Virginia into the Carolinas and Georgia, southward into Florida, and westward as far as Texas before 1860. These pioneering farmers often settled in areas very different from the great plantation regions of which Davis Bend was a part. They made up the great majority of farmers in the mountains of Appalachia and the Ozarks and were predominant in the valleys and rolling hills of the piedmont and along the vast coastal plain that ran from the Chesapeake through Florida and on to the Texas gulf coast. Other southerners made their places in the cities and towns of the overwhelmingly agricultural South. Such places were sites for commercial enterprise and some manufacturing. Urban areas also afforded desired refinements for their residents and for the surrounding countryside.

Joseph Davis, for instance, found Natchez a good place for an ambitious attorney, and Jefferson Davis attended a private academy near there as well as one in Kentucky. Like many ambitious Americans at the time, the youngest Davis seems to have believed that advanced education could improve his prospects. Thus, Jefferson graduated from academies to Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, where he spent a year. Founded in 1780, Transylvania developed into the first center of learning west of the Appalachians and south of the Ohio River. Jefferson Davis completed his formal education at West Point. After an unexceptional academic career, he spent most of his seven-year army career at frontier posts in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Oklahoma.



Jefferson Davis briefly returned to the military in the 1840s, when he fought with distinction in the Mexican War. After 1835, however, he devoted most of his energies to his plantation and to his highly successful political career. Despite ill health, Davis drove himself to build first an impressive plantation estate and then an impressive political career. The latter pursuit required innumerable stump speeches, interminable rounds of political meetings, and mountains of correspondence with constituents and fellow politicians. Several heated disputes stopped just short of duels. Davis survived dirt roads, mud roads, carts, wagons, carriages, lurching spark-spewing trains, sailing ships, steamboats, inns, hotels, good food, bad food, and tobacco-spitting, importuning, and sometimes sweaty constituents from Mississippi to Washington and back. Davis represented his state in the United States House of Representatives and the Senate and served as a highly competent, dedicated secretary of war in the administration of President Franklin Pierce. Like other southerners in his day and later, Jefferson Davis was an American in his efforts to succeed and in his national loyalties. Indeed, Davis was convinced that as a leader first of the South in Congress and later of the Confederate States of America, he was risking civil war and his life and fortune to preserve the Constitution, which he saw as the bulwark of liberty.

To Davis, the election of Abraham Lincoln posed a revolutionary threat; Lincoln's election meant the triumph of the antislavery movement—a movement dedicated to destroying southern rights. Announcing his resignation from the Senate in January 1861, Davis told his fellow senators and the nation that



JOSEPH DAVIS (Eleanor S. Brock-  
enbrough (Library, Museum of the  
Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia) .

the southern states had been forced to secede from the Union because the Republicans who were coming to power "denie[d] us equality...refuse[d] to recognize our domestic institutions which preexisted the formation of the Union, our property which was guarded by the Constitution." He accused Lincoln of making "a distinct declaration of war upon our institutions." Davis asked that the states which chose to secede be allowed to do so peacefully, but if the North insisted that the South "remain as subjects to you, then, gentlemen of the North, a war is to be inaugurated the like of which men have not seen."

In 1860 and 1861 the southern states seceded from the Union to prevent the federal government from intruding on their rights and abolishing slavery, the cornerstone of white southern society. To preserve that society the South took up arms against the Union. As a consequence, the Union intruded massively in the South—and with devastating impact—from 1861 until the end of Reconstruction in 1877. After the Civil War, the South erected a defense to ward off unwelcome outside intrusions in its race relations and other aspects of its life. The most concrete form of that defense was the "Solid South," or the thorough dominance of the South by the Democratic party. Fashioning itself as "the party of white supremacy," the Democratic party grounded its appeal on maintaining white unity in the South, keeping southern blacks subordinate ("in their place"), and preventing interference with that arrangement.

Erected during the 1870s and 1880s, the Solid South remained in place until after World War II. Breaches in the one-party politics of the Democratic South appeared earlier, however, under the federal government's efforts to combat the depression of the 1930s. The Solid South cracked during the 1948 presidential election, then shattered during the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Propelled by America's post-1940 economic boom and by massive federal spending in the region, a more prosperous, two-party South found a comfortable place in the Sunbelt and in national politics and became a much greater force in the nation than it had been at any previous time since the 1860s.

The South's failed attempt to reshape America by leaving the Union in 1860 defined the region and its people for all the generations that have followed. Thus the South and southerners can be defined as the states that seceded and the people who supported secession and identified themselves then and later with what they believed was its noble cause. But identifying the South and southerners in terms of the Civil War yields too narrow a definition. Though that definition has the advantage of clarity, it seriously distorts the realities of the past and even the present. So, in this book, the southern states are defined as the eleven Confederate states plus Kentucky, Maryland, and, after the Civil War, Oklahoma, the creation of latter-day pioneers who erected a Dixie on the plains. Kentucky and Maryland nearly seceded. Both provided troops for the Confederacy, as did Missouri, a state deeply divided by the Civil War. This state-based definition of the South is hardly free of ambiguities. Parts of West Virginia, for instance, are more southern than west Texas, southern Florida, and parts of Kentucky and Oklahoma ever were, and substantial numbers of West Virginians served in the Confederate armed forces.

Using the Civil War as a reference point to define southerners is even more misleading. Not all southerners in the 1860s supported secession or identified with its cause, though they often suffered from the defeat of the Confederacy. Unionist sentiment was strongest in the South among mountain whites. Depredations during the war reinforced the Unionist feelings of many people, particularly in Appalachia. Black southerners celebrated the defeat of the Confederacy for obvious reasons. African-Americans lived all over the South in 1860, but usually on plantations such as those at Davis Bend, and they had interacted with whites since the seventeenth century to create much of what made the South. Without that interaction there would have been no South as the term and the region are commonly understood. Moreover, southern blacks and whites had and have striking cultural similarities and strikingly similar historical experiences. Both have experienced economic inferiority, and both have been disdained as cultural and moral inferiors. The labor, skills, and ideas of blacks have been critical to the development and evolution of the South. For the sake of convenience and clarity, however, southerners are white in this book unless we explicitly state otherwise or unless the context implies a different interpretation.

The Davises, especially Joseph Davis, certainly knew how important blacks were to them. They acknowledged the importance of blacks to their lives, in part by being lenient masters. Some local whites disparaged Joseph Davis's slaves as "Mr. Davis's free negroes." The neighbors may have had Benjamin Thornton Montgomery in mind when they said such things. Born into slavery in northern Virginia in 1819, Montgomery grew up as the companion of his young master. He moved westward involuntarily to Natchez in 1836 when, without notice or explanation, he was sold to a slave trader. The trader took Montgomery with a gang of other recently purchased slaves to the booming slave markets of Mississippi's black belt. There Joseph Davis bought Montgomery, but the young slave soon ran away. Unfamiliar with his new surroundings, Montgomery was caught almost immediately. When Davis questioned Montgomery about his attempted escape, he quickly realized Montgomery's considerable capacities and encouraged them. Montgomery, who had learned to read and write from his young master in Virginia, eventually became a mechanic, inventor, surveyor, builder, and merchant. He and his wife, Mary Lewis Montgomery, who was also literate, arranged, with Davis's approval, for the schooling of their children. Montgomery played a major role in the life of Davis Bend before and after the war reached the peninsula.

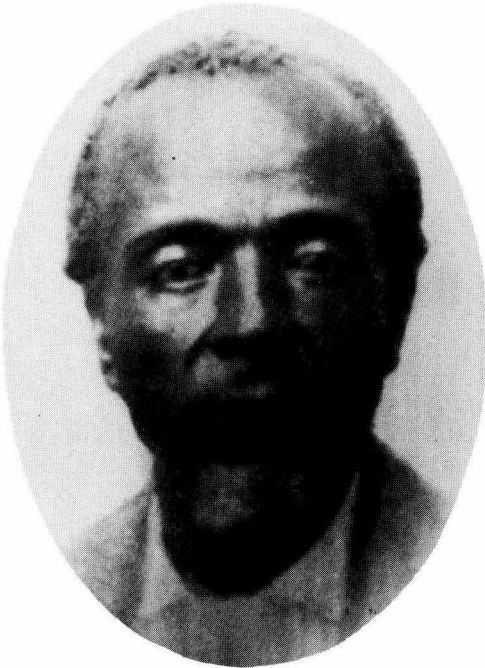
In January 1861, Jefferson Davis left Washington and returned home. In February he left Davis Bend to be inaugurated as president of the Confederacy. In April 1862, Joseph Davis took his family and about a hundred slaves and fled his river home to escape the advance of Union forces. Most of their slaves deserted them during their hasty retreat, and some of them later descended upon the mansion to pillage clothing and furniture. Union troops did even more damage when they arrived. Not long afterward, Benjamin Montgomery reasserted his leadership. Eventually, after the war, he bought the plantation from

Joseph Davis, with whom he had maintained regular communication. For several years Montgomery succeeded, but forces beyond his control doomed his efforts. Eventually the community at Davis Bend dissolved. Even the river took its toll: the main channel of the Mississippi swept across the neck of the peninsula and turned Davis Bend into Davis Island.

The war destroyed the slave-based plantation society of the antebellum South: the South of planters, slaves, and highly profitable cash crops, which once was so easily identifiable, faded. Within a generation another, also easily identifiable South emerged: a region of chronic underdevelopment, poverty, one-party politics, and Jim Crow, a rigid racial caste system. Once again, to the rest of Americans the South was the deviant region. And it seemed not to change at all until World War II. That perception was wrong, however, just as was the perception that the antebellum South had been unchanging.

The South did not stand still from 1865 to 1940. The New South, a more urban, industrial South, began to appear soon after the Civil War, but it did not emerge fully until the 1920s. Still, low incomes persisted, race relations remained frozen, and one-party politics and impotence on the national scene seemed permanent conditions. But before World War II, each of these fundamental characteristics of the South after the Civil War began to change. The depression of the 1930s and the New Deal of President Franklin Roosevelt hastened change, and World War II accelerated the process by which the Sunbelt South emerged.

BENJAMIN THORNTON MONT-  
GOMERY (Library of Congress)



In the years since 1945, the economics, politics, and race relations of the South have changed so much that the South of the 1990s, the Sunbelt South, seems to have almost no connection with the South of Jefferson Davis or the South after the Civil War, even with the South of the 1930s. The South is now more prosperous than it has been at any previous time since the 1850s. Unlike the antebellum South, however, the Sunbelt South resembles the rest of the country in its politics and its race relations. Though vestiges of poverty, one-party politics, and Jim Crow remain, the picture of the poor, backward South has dissolved into an image of prosperity.

Defining southern identity is not so easy as it once was. One of the region's loyal sons and keen observers declared in 1973 that "the South is just about over as a separate . . . place." But another perceptive student of the South said in 1983 that he "knows when he is in the South." The South may have lost some of its distinctiveness, but much remains. The South remains the United States' most obviously distinctive region in ways that are still very important: in culture and religion, in ethnic composition, in its sense of having a unique past, and in its sense of place. Southerners have deep attachments to their region. Those attachments have been expressed, among other ways, in the determination of southerners to remain Americans with a special regional identity even in the homogenized culture of the late twentieth century. That determination helps explain why the South has endured as the United States' most distinctive region for more than two hundred years and why the history of the South continues to fascinate so many people.

This book tries to answer two questions: What was and is the American South? What was and is a southerner? The answers to these questions depend largely on where and when they are asked. The answers are easier and clearer at some times than at others. The answer to the question about southern identity is harder and less clear now than at any previous time since the mid-eighteenth century. Still, the South endures. It endures in part because not even a flood of changes has washed away critical connections between the past and the present in the South.

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