

## Southern Society: Planters, Yeomen & Poor Whites

### Reading Passage

Southern society in the antebellum period was not made up of wealthy planters alone. In fact, the majority of white Southerners did not own enslaved people. Yet the entire social and political structure of the South was built around the plantation system and the institution of slavery. Why did so many non-slaveholding whites support it?

At the top of Southern white society sat the planter aristocracy — families who owned 20 or more enslaved people and commanded large plantations. This group was small: fewer than 1% of the Southern population owned 50 or more enslaved people. Yet they wielded enormous political and cultural power. They dominated state legislatures, served as judges and governors, and set the social values of the region.

Below them were yeomen farmers — the backbone of Southern white society. These small, independent landowners might cultivate 50 to 100 acres, often with the labor of their own family and perhaps one or two enslaved people. They valued self-reliance and independence, but they aspired to the planter ideal and generally supported slavery as an institution.

At the bottom of the white social ladder were poor whites — sometimes called “crackers” or white trash; in a derogatory way. They owned little land, often worked as tenants or day laborers, and lived in poverty. Yet even they had reason, within the racist logic of the time, to support slavery: however poor they were, they were not enslaved. Racial hierarchy gave the poorest white person a sense of superiority over even the wealthiest Black person.

This system benefited the planter class enormously. By convincing poor and middle-class whites that racial solidarity mattered more than economic interests, planters kept the majority of white Southerners aligned behind the institution of slavery — even when it served them poorly.