

Session 2

The American Civil War

North versus South

The abolition of slavery in America was more complicated than it was in Britain because it was a domestic rather than a colonial issue. Between 1815 and 1861 the economy of the Northern states was rapidly modernising and diversifying. Although agriculture remained the dominant sector, industrialisation had taken root there. The Southern economy, however, was based principally on large farms (plantations) that produced commercial crops such as cotton. They relied on slaves as the main labour force.

By 1860, 84% of the capital invested in manufacturing was invested in the free states but, thanks to the price of cotton, the *per capita* wealth of Southern whites was twice that of Northerners. Three-fifths of the wealthiest individuals in the country were Southerners.

The central government was keen to hold the union together and so it was difficult for abolitionists to lobby for changes despite the argument that “the land of the free” contained a large number of people who were anything but free. For the southern states it was a constitutional matter of independence as well as economics.

Abolitionism

There were those who actively worked to help the slaves. The Underground Railroad was the name given to the system by which escaped slaves from the South were helped in their flight to the North. It is believed that the system started in 1787 when Isaac T. Hopper, a Quaker, began to organise a system for hiding and aiding fugitive slaves. Opponents of slavery allowed their homes, called stations, to be used as places where escaped slaves were provided with food, shelter and money. The various routes went through fourteen Northern states and Canada. It is estimated that by 1850 around 3,000 people worked on the Underground Railroad and that it enabled over 50,000 slaves to escape from the South.

The Underground Railroad also had people known as conductors who went to the south and helped guide slaves to safety. One of the most important of these was the former slave, Harriet Tubman. She made nineteen secret trips to the South, during which she led more than 300 slaves to freedom. Tubman

was considered such a threat to the slave system that plantation owners offered a \$40,000 reward for her capture.

Plantation owners became concerned at the large number of slaves escaping to the North and in 1850 managed to persuade Congress to pass the Fugitive Slave Act. In future, any federal marshal who did not arrest an alleged runaway slave could be fined \$1,000. Any person aiding a runaway slave by providing shelter food or any other form of assistance was liable to six months' imprisonment and a \$1,000 fine. The act failed to stop the work of the Underground Railroad, however.

The main activist arm of the Abolition Movement, The American Anti-Slavery Society, was founded in 1833 under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison and worked through pamphlets, petitions and speeches to bring about change. Politically, however, this was slow to come and so more militant abolitionists began to resort to violence. John Brown was one such. Brown was eventually hanged in 1859 for murder, slave insurrection, and treason against the state after leading an unsuccessful raid on a federal armoury at Harpers Ferry. Although Brown failed to spark a general slave revolt, the high moral tone of his defence helped to immortalise him and to hasten the war that would bring emancipation. As they marched into battle during the Civil War, Union soldiers sang a song called "John Brown's Body." This would later provide the tune for "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Alarmed by the Harper's Ferry raid, the South became convinced that its entire way of life was threatened by the election to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln (November 1860). Abraham Lincoln was the candidate of the explicitly anti-slavery Republican Party. Seven Southern states (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas) seceded from the Union. They organised themselves as the Confederate States of America. They were subsequently joined by four more Southern states (Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina).

The Civil War that followed killed 2% of the American population but also ended slavery in America.

Liverpool and the Civil War

Britain took a neutral position in the Civil War; the North West, however, was badly hit. Manchester and the surrounding Lancashire textile towns imported 80% of their raw cotton from the Southern plantations through the port of

Liverpool. Manchester by and large supported the North despite the fact that the naval blockade of the Confederacy ended the supply of cotton and left thousands of Lancashire textile workers on the brink of starvation. Liverpool, however, played a part in supporting the Confederacy during the American Civil War. At the outbreak of the war the Southern States were at a disadvantage. The North had more manufacturing industry and so the Confederacy had to look to Europe for arms and supplies. The already strong links from the cotton trade made Liverpool the obvious choice. The Confederacy had no navy or ships to beat the Northern blockade of Southern ports. They looked to Liverpool shipyards to secretly build a fleet of blockade-runners and naval cruisers. Liverpool and Birkenhead ship builder produced ships for the Confederacy including the CSS Alabama. During her two year career, with a mostly British and Liverpool crew, this most successful of the commerce raiders captured or burned 65 Union merchant ships. In 1873 the United States Government's demand that the British Government should pay compensation for the damage caused by the Confederate ships was settled. It was known as the 'Alabama Claim', because she had caused the most damage, and together with the 'Florida' and 'Shenandoah', had accounted for half of the total number of Union vessels captured. It resulted in the British Government paying £3,000,000 compensation for allowing the Confederate Government to purchase the ships in England and allowing them to use British ports.

Although the last battle of the American Civil War was at Palmito Ranch in May 1865, the last Confederate surrender occurred in Liverpool. On 6 November 1865 the Confederate warship 'CSS Shenandoah' surrendered at Liverpool. She had not been aware of the end of the war until August and so her captain chose to surrender in Liverpool rather than face potential piracy charges in America.