

Sectional Issues of the Antebellum Period

Part A.

Directions: Read the following overview of three sections of the antebellum United States. Then read the vignettes of three typical individuals, and complete the chart with each man's position and rationale on the issues.

Sectional Framework

East

- Political** The region developed a broad-based democracy as property qualifications for voting were either reduced or eliminated for white males.
- Economic** The area's diversified economy included commerce, banking, manufacturing, forest and mining products, as well as stable, family-sized farms.
- Social** A wide class structure ranged from wealthy businessmen to a few remaining indentured servants. Public schools, as well as a number of universities, had developed, and urban centers with a cultural and intellectual base were emerging.

South

- Political** An aristocratic form of government, which had existed since colonial times, was well-established by the nineteenth century.
- Economic** The planter aristocracy dominated the economy and produced a staple crop with slave labor. However, most whites lived a marginal existence on small farms.
- Social** Few centers of learning or urban centers existed in this agrarian setting. A small percentage of white planters ran the establishment. Yeoman farmers yearned to become planters and supported slavery to keep African Americans in a subordinate position.

West

- Political** A democratic society based on white male suffrage developed, but African Americans and women were not granted the right to vote.
- Economic** Farms, owned and operated by the family, used large-scale agriculture and the new machinery of the period to produce food for eastern markets.
- Social** While a few cities developed as centers of commerce, most people lived a rural life. The Northwest Ordinance placed an emphasis on education. In the early 1830s, Oberlin College became the first college to admit women and African Americans.

Typical Individuals

James Watson

A manufacturer of cotton textiles in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Watson is the son of an early factory owner who recognized the value of the cotton spinning machine for which Samuel Slater smuggled plans out of England. The elder Mr. Watson started a small mill in 1812 and, with the help of his son, James, expanded the mill threefold and began spinning, weaving, and dying cloth. James Watson sees the possibility of further expansion as transportation makes markets more readily available.

George Hicks

George Hicks recently moved to Indiana from Vermont, where he had operated a small general farm. He purchased new farm machinery and two hundred acres on the Wabash River. With the help of his son, he grows wheat for sale in the East. He transports his produce via the Wabash and Erie Canal and the Great Lakes and the Erie Canal to eastern markets. With the influx of immigrants and the growth of cities in the East, Hicks is considering expanding his acreage in hopes of further increasing his profits.

Richard Fitzhugh

In 1849, Richard Fitzhugh inherited a plantation from his father. The nearly three thousand acres are situated on the banks of the Savannah River in Georgia. Fitzhugh has two hundred slaves, including 150 field hands. Mr. Fitzhugh is descended from an old line of Southern plantation owners whose ancestors originally worked plantations in the tobacco lands of Virginia. He is a well-educated gentleman, having graduated from the College of William and Mary, where he learned the values and practices of the Southern code of chivalry.

Issue	Watson	Hicks	Fitzhugh
1. The national government should pass high tariffs.			
2. The national government should encourage settlement of small farms in the West.			
3. The national government should complete the nation's Manifest Destiny and prepare the new acquisitions for eventual statehood.			
4. The national government should promote internal improvements, including roads, canals, and railroads, at government expense.			
5. The national government should abolish slavery.			
6. The national government should promote technology.			
7. The national government should promote unlimited immigration to this country.			
8. The national government should promote universal education.			

Part B.

Directions: Use your completed chart in part A to answer the following questions.

1. How did the definition of “West” change in the years 1800 to 1860?
2. What were the assets of continental expansion?
3. What negatives accompanied new territorial acquisitions?
4. How did Henry Clay’s American System help to promote national unity?
5. How did the social structure change more dramatically in the North than in the South in the decades before the Civil War?
6. How would you characterize the emerging position of the West within the Union during the decades before the Civil War?
7. How did the increasing regionalization of the nation create difficulties for the national government?