Kenneth M. Stampp of the University of California has written the most authoritative study of slavery in the ante-bellum South in our own time. His The Peculiar Institution is based upon many years of research among source materials that exceed in volume and scope those used by older scholars like Ulrich B. Phillips. In this work, Stampp revises many of the older conclusions of scholars and offers us a fresh view of the way in which the slave system became a significant part of the social structure and the ideology of the South. The following selection is from The Peculiar Institution.

If all men are somehow naturally endowed with such "unalienable rights* as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, this principle was discovered relatively late in human history. Many centuries earlier some men learned that they could gain practical advantages from an unequal distribution of rights and from transgression upon the liberties of others. The application of this concept to prisoners of war was doubtless an improvement over the mere primitive practice of putting them to death. The extermination of prisoners became less fashionable whenever a group of people abandoned nomadic pursuits for the more sedentary life of townsmen and agriculturists. Then it seemed desirable to spare the lives of at least some captives in order to exploit their labor.

Thus the ancient Egyptians reached out among their Semitic and Ethiopian neighbors for slave laborers. The Athenians, as Americans of the ante-bellum South were fond of recalling, attained unprecedented heights of intellectual and artistic achievement in a society built upon a foundation of servitude. The Romans made chattel slaves of captives taken in Gaul, Spain, Sardinia, North Africa, and western Asia. Some of these bondsmen worked on the country estates of Roman squires; others were consigned to frightful toil in the mines and on merchant ships; still others were converted into fawning domestics; and the most robust among them amused the multitude in the role of gladiators. Slavery was clearly one of the legacies of antiquity,

In the Middle Ages bondage was still flourishing in various forms. The lands of European nobles were cultivated by serfs whose status was above that of chattel slaves but who were nevertheless bound to the soil in a condition of hereditary servitude. The ultimate decline of villeinage in England did not mean that all Englishmen were at last free, for in the seventeenth century they were still familiar with other types of bondage. Debtors, rogues, vagabonds, and paupers were legally deprived of their freedom and endured the indignity of the la?h. Economic necessity reduced other poor men to the same condition when they indentured themselves for a term of years. These forms of white servitude were introduced into the English colonies almost as soon as they were founded. Redemptioners paid their passage to America by binding themselves as servants for terms of from two to seven years. In the seventeenth century most of the servants were English; in the eighteenth century most of them were Germans, Swiss, Scots, Scotch-Irish, and Irish. Victims of kidnappers and convicts sentenced to transportation by English courts supplemented this flow of unfree labor. Probably more than half of the immigrants to the thirteen English colonies in North America came as bondsmen. After the horrors of the passage they often endured the
cruelty of masters determined to extract from them the maximum of labor at a minimum of expense. Though they ultimately gained their freedom, they nevertheless made servitude an established labor system in all the colonies. Meanwhile, the religious zeal of Christians and Moslems had helped to revive and spread a form of servitude once justified primarily by the ancient laws of war. Members of each faith looked upon the other as infidels, and hence each felt doubly entitled to make slaves of the other when taken as captives. Moors captured in North Africa and in the Spanish peninsula were held in bondage in Italy. Spain, Portugal, and France. Christian prisoners suffered the same fate in the lands of Islam.

Christians and Moslems alike believed it just to hold heathens in servitude, and both found victims among the Negroes of Africa. Their operations were facilitated by the fact that slavery already existed among the Negro tribes and that native dealers were often willing participants in this trade in human flesh. The Christian purchasers liked to think of themselves as the agents of civilization and of the true religion. The native traders were less philosophical about their business.

During the fifteenth century Spaniards and Portuguese brought cargoes of Negro servants to Europe from their trading centers on the west coast of Africa south of the Sahara. In the early sixteenth century the Portuguese in Brazil and the Spanish in other parts of the New World found more heathens eligible for bondage. In the West Indies the Christianizing and civilizing influence of the encomenderos was costly to the Indians who first lost their freedom and then their lives through disease and heavy labor in mines and sugar cane fields. As the supply of Indians dwindled, Negroes were imported in increasing numbers. Before 1600, Negro labor was being utilized in nearly every part of the sprawling Spanish and Portuguese empires.

By the seventeenth century, the Dutch, French, and English had entered the profitable slave trade and had seized colonies of their own in the Caribbean. The Dutch in Curacao, St. Eustatius, and Tobago, the French in Guadeloupe and Martinique, and the English in Jamaica and Barbados helped to develop Negro slavery and the plantation system in the New World. For many years the English esteemed their sugar islands more highly than any of their other possessions in America. In these islands planters, merchants, and Negro traders shared in the profits extracted from the labor of black bondsmen.

When a "Dutch man of warre" brought the first cargo of twenty "negars" to Virginia in 1619, John Rolfe and his neighbors sanctioned a trade and tapped a source of labor that had been familiar to some Europeans for nearly two centuries. Virginia landholders received a small trickle of Negro servants during the next fifty years and worked them on tobacco plantations along with their infinitely more numerous white servants. As early as the KSO's, Maryland planters began to use black labor; in 1669, Carolina's Lords Proprietors promulgated John Locke's "Fundamental Constitutions" which gave every freeman "absolute power and authority over his negro slaves"; by 1750, Georgia colonists had persuaded the trustees to rescind their original policy of prohibiting slavery.
The middle colonies also purchased a substantial number of Negroes. If only a few New Englanders became slaveholders, some merchants of Newport, Providence, Boston, and Salem were vigorous and eminently successful participants in the slave trade. Later generations of Southerners did not forget that the ancestors of the abolitionists had helped to keep them well supplied with slaves.

Ante-bellum Southerners understood this world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries better than they understood their own. The quest for enlarged opportunities which brought their colonial forebears to America was a personal objective which did not necessarily mean that they believed in the equality of all men. If southern colonists did little to improve the lot of propertyless laborers, their neighbors were hardly in a position to criticize them for it. To the north and to the south of them Englishmen, Dutchmen, Spaniards, and Portuguese held Indians, Negroes, and whites in bondage. This being the case, their use of unfree labor demanded of them a minimum of soul searching. Since their social institutions were not peculiar in any fundamental way, they lived comfortably in their world.

But ante-bellum Southerners lived less comfortably in the world of the nineteenth century. They found themselves increasingly isolated, increasingly on the defensive, increasingly compelled to improvise, as the code by which their fathers had justified the holding of slaves became less and less intelligible. The heathens they had imported from Africa had now become Christians. The theory that it was proper to enslave prisoners taken in "just wars" belonged to the dead past. The fact that many of the ancestors of southern Negroes had been slaves in their own lands now seemed strangely irrelevant. Above all, the ideals of the Enlightenment, especially the doctrine of natural rights and the belief in the inherent goodness and dignity of man, had found one of their most eloquent champions in the South's greatest statesman. An impressive number of Southerners never would agree that Jefferson's philosophy was wrong.

The facts were no less disturbing than the theories. Outside the South reformers everywhere made the destruction of legal servitude one of their major goals. By 1860, economic liberals, who linked social progress with the concept of free labor in a competitive society, had won a series of decisive victories. In the north-em states slavery did not long survive the social upheaval which was part of the American Revolution. Not because slave labor was unprofitable, but because they were given no choice, northern slaveholders accepted a domestic application of the principles which had justified resistance to British authority. During the 1780's, these states put slavery the course of ultimate extinction," usually through a system of gradual emancipation which took a generation to complete. The new spirit was contagious. In Haiti, when the French seemed inclined to restrict the benefits of their own revolution to the white race, the Negro slaves helped themselves to freedom by * rebellion which all but destroyed the old master class. In 1833, the British government made provision fur the abolition of slavery in its possessions. Slavery entered a period of decline in the new Spanish-American republics, until the last of them abolished it during the 1650's.
But in spite of these cataclysmic events, most Southerners clung to slavery. It survived the ordeal of the Revolution and the assaults of the Smith's own revolutionary radicals. It survived the French Revolution, though Southerners shuddered at the price Toussaint L'ouverture and his Negro followers exacted from Haitian mailers. Slavery survived the liberalism of Jeffersonian Democracy and the egalitarianism of Jacksonian Democracy. It survived the persistent criticism and the emancipation schemes of native Southerners, especially in the Upper South, and a month of antislavery debate carried on during January, 1832, in the Virginia legislature. It survived a thirty-year crusade against it conducted by northern abolitionists. Southern slavery more than survived; the slaveholders enlarged their domain, tightened the slave's shackles, and defiantly told outsiders to mind their own affairs. The South of 1560, big and prosperous, still boldly defended its peculiar institution.

Its trouble, however, was manifest in the term itself. For by 1850 chattel slavery had become in literal truth a peculiar institution, and Southerners knew it. The fact that they had inherited slavery and not invented it was now quite beside the point, and many Southerners knew this too. The one supremely relevant fact was that Southerners were among slavery's last apologists—that theirs was a "Lost Cause" even before they took up arms to defend it. Being culturally isolated, living in an unfriendly world, was a frightening experience which made many of them angry and aggressive. Outside of Africa itself, they now could look only to Brazil, Cuba, Porto Rico, and Dutch Guiana for societies which, like their own contained masters and slaves. The rest of the world was inhabited" by strangers.

In its early stages the South's peculiar institution grew slowly and uncertainly. The specific form it took in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was unknown to English law and in some respects unlike the forms of servitude which had developed in other places. During most of the seventeenth century the Negro's status was so vague and amorphous that his ultimate position might conceivably have been defined in several different ways, in any case, the Negro's presence in the South antedated by many years the legal existence of chattel slavery. That some early colonial statutes used the term "slave" had no decisive significance, of course the term had sometimes been applied loosely to white servants.

In the main, Maryland and Virginia masters first subjected their Negroes to the customary forms of servitude. Like white servants, some of them gained their freedom after serving a term of years, or after conversion to Christianity. If their bondage tended to be more severe, their terms of service longer of even of indefinite duration, this merely indicated that attractive inducements did not have to be held out to servants whose choice.

Moreover, the Negro and white servants of the seventeenth century seemed to be remarkably unconcerned about their visible physical differences. They toiled together in the fields, fraternized during leisure hours, and, in and out of wedlock, collaborated in siring a numerous progeny. Though the first southern white settlers were quite familiar
with rigid class lines, they were as unfamiliar with a caste system as they were with chattel slavery.

The statutes which made clear distinctions between white and Negro bondsmen evolved piecemeal. No specific date marked the legal establishment of chattel slavery in the South; but there were few obstacles in the way of its development. Neither the provisions of their charters nor the policy of the English government limited the power of colonial legislatures to control Negro labor as they saw fit. Negroes did not have the benefit of written indentures which defined their rights and limited their terms of service. Their unprotected condition encouraged the trend toward special treatment, and their physical and cultural differences provided handy excuses to justify it. More than anything eke, however, the landholders' growing appreciation of the advantages of slavery over the older forms of servitude gave a powerful impetus to the growth of the new labor system. Southern masters developed much—though net all—of the system by custom before it was recognized in law.

Not until the 1660s could Maryland and Virginia make the first important legal distinctions between white and Negro servants. During this decade various statutes provided that Negroes were to be slaves for life, that the child was to inherit the condition of the mother, and that Christian baptism did not change the slave's status. Even then it took many more years and many additional statutes to define clearly the nature of slaves as property, to confer upon the masters the required disciplinary power, to enact the codes by which the slaves' movements were subjected to public control, and to give them a peculiar position in courts of law. Other statutes prohibited interracial marriages, in order to prevent "that abominable mixture and spurious issue." By the eighteenth century color had become not only the evidence of slavery but also a badge of degradation. Thus the master class, for its own purposes, wrote chattel slavery, the caste system, and color prejudice into American custom and law.

The general trend of colonial policy toward American Indians was against their enslavement. It is not necessary to search for innate psychic qualities in the Indians to explain why most of them were not reduced to the status of the Negroes. In the West Indies it was not so much the humiliation of bondage as its rigors that caused Indian slaves to perish so rapidly. In the English colonies, especially in the Carolinas, at various times some Indian captives were held as servants or slaves. Whenever Negroes and Indians were thus brought in contact with each other they intermarried, with the result that a considerable number of southern slaves were of mixed Negro and Indian ancestry.

But Indian servitude was never an adequate or satisfactory answer to the labor needs of southern landholders. Cultural factors made it difficult for Indians to adapt to the plantation regime. Unlike the Negroes, Indian slaves found it relatively easy to escape along familiar forest trails to the protection of their own people. The weakness of the early white settlements ordinarily caused them to value the friendship of neighboring Indians more than their potential labor. As early as 1636, the Virginia Assembly passed the first of a series of statues prohibiting the enslavement of Indians. By the eighteenth
century, Virginia’s courts distinguished between decent from Africans and from native American Indians and accepted proof of the latter as evidence of freedom. Here and elsewhere in the South only a predominately Negro ancestry created the presumption of slavery.

During the seventeenth century the South’s Negro population increased very slowly. In 1649, thirty years after the arrival of the first Africans, Virginia counted only three hundred black laborers in its population. Until the end of the century southern landholders relied chiefly upon the labor of white servants. Then, when English and colonial merchants entered the slave trade on a large scale, and when the advantages of slavery were fully understood, Negros began to arrive in substantial numbers. In the eighteenth century, thousands of them were imported annually, some from the West Indies, but most directly from Africa. By the eve of the American Revolution, Virginia’s population was nearly evenly divided between Negroes and whites: in South Carolina the Negroes outnumbered the whites by two to one.

It was the common lot of poor emigrants from Europe to suffer great hardship in making the passage to America. Not only in the colonial period, but also in the nineteenth century, the ordeal of leaving familiar places, breaking old ties, making the journey on overcrowded vessels, and adjusting to a strange environment was a dreadful experience. But none of the European immigrant groups felt the shock of these experiences quite as severely as did the Africans. The inhumanity of the traders, the terrors of the Middle Passage, and the "breaking in" process in America gave these involuntary immigrants a vivid impression of the white man and his culture which they did not soon forget. Estimates of the total number of Negroes torn from their African homes and carried to the New World range upward from five million. Of these, perhaps a half million were brought to the South legally before 1808, and thousands more illegally thereafter. Eighteenth-century Southerners, their humanitarianism fortified by practical considerations, made the first attempts to control or abolish the African slave trade. These measures were motivated by the desire of established planters to keep prices up and restrict competition, by the fear of too high a proportion of slaves in the total population, and by the danger of receiving rebellions slaves from the West Indies. But before the Revolution all restrictions on the trade were disallowed by the English government in the interest of the traders. Delaware finally prohibited importations of Africans in 1776. Virginia in 1775, Maryland in 1783, South Carolina in 1787, North Carolina in 1794, and Georgia in 1798. South Carolina reopened the trade in 1803 and imported 39,000 additional black laborers before it was closed by Federal action five years later. After that the natural increase of the existing stock had to be the main reliance for an increased supply. By 1810 the southern slave population had grown to more than a million.

The closing of the African slave trade did not prove to be the first step toward the abolition of slavery itself. For at the very time that the foreign supply was being cut off, another fateful development was taking place: slavery was spreading beyond the limits of the original southern states. The Federal Constitution had placed no obstacles in the way of its expansion, for it accepted slavery as a local institution to be protected or
prohibited according to the wishes of individual states. The exclusion of slavery from the territory north of the Ohio River, written into the Ordinance of 1787, was not applied to the territory south of it. Accordingly, one by one, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama entered the Union as slave states. Slavery had already existed in the regions acquired from France and Spain by the Louisiana and Florida purchases. Four more slave states—Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Florida—were carved out of these lands. Before the annexation of Texas in 1845, Americans had firmly planted slavery in its soil. By then slavery's empire included fifteen states ranging southward and westward from the Delaware River to the Bio Grande.

Was this the end? Had slavery now reached the "natural limits" of its expansion? If it had, there were many Americans who still hoped—or feared—that it had not. New Mexico and Utah were opened to slavery by the Compromise of 1850, the territory north of the Missouri Compromise line by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Manifest Destiny held the glittering promise of more land for slavery in Mexico, Central America, and Cuba. In the Dred Scott case the Supreme Court gave judicial sanction to the proslavery doctrine that the peculiar institution could not be excluded from any of the territories of the United States. In 1860 the expansion of slavery still remained a lively issue.

"Somehow this must end." said Northerners as they cast their votes for Abraham Lincoln. "But it cannot end, for that would destroy us," replied secessionists as they launched the Confederate States of America.

So came the harvest. Planted experimentally in the seventeenth century, cultivated systematically in the eighteenth, sheltered from the storms of the Revolution, then transplanted to new lands in the West, chattel slavery reached maturity in the ante-bellum period. The nature of its fruit was determined not by the climate, not by the soil, but by the kinds of seeds sown by men. But how could the first 'Southerners have known that they had sown a crop of weeds? How long should it have taken their descendants to realize that this rank crop was choking every other growing thing? Only this can be said: All alone a few southern skeptics had been predicting that at harvest time it would be this way.

By the 1830’s southern agriculture had regained much of the vitality it had possessed in colonial days. Virginians were beginning to recover from an agricultural depression which had plagued them for half a century. They were improving their methods, reclaiming their worn-out lands, and finding new crops to free them from the tyranny of tobacco. Carolinians and Georgian; were busy feeding cotton to the mills of Manchester and Lowell. Many emigrants from these older states were finding opportunities to grow one of the great southern staples on the virgin lands of the Southwest. If a Virginian or Carolinian did not get the "Alabama fever" himself, he at least knew that in these new regions there were ready markets for as many Negroes as he could spare. Everywhere—in Virginia as well as in Georgia or Mississippi or Louisiana—slaves were a more or less vital part of the economy, an important source of labor, and a valuable type of property. Southerners measured their rank in society by counting their slaves. By the 1830's the fateful decision had been made. Slavery, now an integral part of the southern way of life, was to be preserved, not as a transitory evil, an unfortunate legacy of the
past, but as a permanent institution—a positive good. To think of abolition was an idle
dream. Now even native Southerners criticized the peculiar institution at their peril.

Finally, by the 1830’s slavery had assumed the rigidity of an entrenched institution. It no
longer had the plasticity—the capacity to modify its shape—that it had in the colonial
period. Slavery had crystallized; its form was fixed. In 1360 the peculiar institution was
almost precisely what it had been thirty years before. If anything, the chains of bondage
were strengthened, not weakened, in this ante-bellum period. In the hardened pattern of
southern law and custom the twin functions of the slaves were now clearly defined: they
were to labor diligently and breed prolifically for the comfort of their white masters.

The rigid and static nature of antebellum slavery, 1830-1860, makes it possible to
examine it institutionally with only slight regard for chronology. The important variations
in detail that were apparent in the three decades before 1860 were not evidences of
progressive changes in the nature of southern bondage. Rather, they were evidences of
regional variations within the South itself and of natural variations among individual
masters and slaves. For, of course, the inflexibility of the status of slaves did not mean
that they all did the same kind of work or lived under exactly the same conditions, or
that they or their masters were all alike.

Nor did it mean that slavery was of equal importance in the lives of all southern whites
or in the economies of all the Souths many regions. Far from it. Two of the persistent
characteristics of the South’s peculiar institution were the unequal size of individual
slaveholdings and the uneven geographic distribution of the slave population. It is
essential to understand these characteristics if the nature of slavery in the ante-bellum
South is to be fully comprehended. The pattern of slave ownership and distribution was
part of the larger pattern of southern society.

At the end of each decade the Federal census takers assembled facts and figures
which refuted the plantation legend of the Old South. The data showed that the South
was not simply—or even chiefly—a land of planters, slaves, and degraded "poor
whites." Together these three groups constituted less than half of the total southern
population. Most of the remaining Southerners (and the largest single group) were
independent yeoman farmers of varying degrees of affluence. If there were such a thing
as a "typical" ante-bellum Southerner, he belonged to the class of land-owning small
farmers who tilled their own fields, usually without any help except from their wives and
children. He might have devoted a few acres to one of the staples of a "cash crop," but
he devoted most of his land and time to food crops for the subsistence of his own family.
Other smaller groups of Southerners included businessmen, professional men, skilled
artisans, overseen, tenant farmers, and unskilled urban and farm laborers

The South of 1860 was still overwhelmingly rural. Five southern states-North Carolina,
Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas did not have a single city with a population of
10,000. New Orleans was the only big American city that was truly southern. The
peculiar institution then, was part of an agrarian civilization.
If the direct ownership of slave property had been the only way in which Southerners had become personally involved in the slave system, relatively few of them would have had an interest in preserving it. In 1660, there were in the South 385,000 owners of slaves distributed among 1,516,000 free families. Nearly three-fourths of all free Southerners had no connection with slavery through either family ties or direct ownership. The "typical" Southerner was not only a small farmer but also a non-slaveholder.

The proportions of slaveholding and non-slaveholding families varied considerably in different parts of the South. In South Carolina and Mississippi, approximately half of the families owned slaves; in Georgia, two-fifths; in Alabama, Louisiana, and Florida, one-third; in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Texas, one-fourth; in Arkansas, one-fifth; in Maryland and Missouri, one-eighth; and in Delaware, one-thirtieth. These same striking variations occurred regionally within each state.

If membership in the planter class required the ownership of at least twenty slaves, the "typical" slaveholder of 1860 certainly did not belong to it. For 85% of the owners held less than that number, 722 held less than ten, and almost 503 held less than five. Not only was the "typical" slaveholder not a planter, but the "typical" planter worked only a moderate-sized gang of from twenty to fifty-slaves. The planter aristocracy was limited to some ten thousand families who lived off the labor of gangs of more than fifty slaves. The extremely wealthy families who owned more than a hundred slaves numbered less than three thousand, a tiny fraction of the southern population.

However, it does not follow that most of the slaves therefore lived on small agricultural units, for by 1860 slaves were heavily concentrated in the hands of a few owners. Only one-fourth of them belonged to masters who owned less than ten. Considerably more than half of them lived on plantation units of more than twenty slaves, and one-fourth lived on units of more than fifty. That the majority of slaves belonged to members of the planter class, and not to those who operated small farms with a single slave family, is a fact of crucial importance concerning the nature of bondage in the ante-bellum South.

Large slaveholdings were proportionally more numerous in the Deep South than in the Upper South. Thus in Louisiana about one-sixth of the slaves lived on units of less than ten, while in Kentucky almost half lived on such units. In all of the southern states the bulk of the big slaveholdings were clustered together in restricted areas. These were always the areas best suited for the production of staple crops; for example, the alluvial river bottoms where the soil was rich and markets were easily accessible. Concentrations of the southern plantation aristocracy could be found in the sugar parishes of Louisiana, in the Yazoo Basin and around Natchez in Mississippi, in the Black Belt of Alabama, and in the rice swamps and sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia. In marked contrast, every southern state had counties containing not a single large plantation.

The Souths nearly four million slaves were as unevenly distributed geographically as were the big slaveholders. Few of them—probably not many—more than ten per cent—
lived in cities and towns. Though Virginia had more bondsmen than any other state, most of the slaves—2,312,000—lived in the seven states of the Deep South. The proportions of slaves in total state populations ranged from 573 in South Carolina to 1.5% in Delaware.

The heavy concentrations of slaves were naturally in the same regions in which there were heavy concentrations of big slaveholders. In many counties in the Deep South the slaves exceeded the free population by more than two to one. In Issaquena and Washington counties in Mississippi they outnumbered the whites by more than ten to one. Even in the Upper South most of the bondsmen lived in a limited number of staple-producing regions. Some counties in western Virginia had just a few score slaves, while some in southeastern Virginia counted more slaves than whites. In Kentucky, though the whites outnumbered the slaves by four to one, the two groups were nearly equal in the Bluegrass counties of Fayette, Bourbon, and Woodford.

This complex pattern of slave distribution and ownership had an Important bearing upon the lives of all Southerners and upon their relationship to the peculiar institution. Most of the slaves lived in a rural environment, on plantation-sized units, where they cultivated the great staple crops, on the richest lands of the South. Most of them lived in the cotton states, and only a few hundred thousand of them in border state* such as Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri.

For a small percentage of southern whites the pattern provided the economic rewards and social prestige of the plantation. For the great majority of slaveholders it provided the more modest advantages of moderate-sized agricultural units. For the nearly three-fourths of the southern whites who owned no slaves it provided less tangible things: a means of controlling the social and economic competition of Negroes, concrete evidence of membership in a superior caste, a chance perhaps to rise into the planter class. Whatever the reason, most of the non-slaveholders seemed to feel that their interest required them to defend the peculiar institution