Chapter Thirteen

Epilogue

How, at the conclusion of the twentieth century, should the Southern plantation regions be interpreted? One of the most tempting approaches is to portray them as postcolonial areas. Colony and plantation have been intimately associated in world geography and history since the sixteenth century when European powers embarked on imperial paths, carved out large domains in the tropics and subtropics, and established great commercial farms. The South is the part of the United States which is the most similar to the rest of the world, and the plantation regions are the areas of the South which are most comparable to the new nations that inherited plantation economies.

The social research on the American South which began to emerge in the 1920s quickly tied a colonial concept to the Southern realm. The South was a colony of the North, becoming more so after the Civil War. Rupert Vance thought that the South retained “a colonial economy,” and explanation of the realm lay “in the colonial system under which it was founded, . . . the plantation system to which it passed, and the cotton system with its tenancy which prevailed after abolition.”¹ C. Vann Woodward and other scholars continued to employ the colony concept, especially for the New South era.² Key, however, comprehended that spatial variation existed within the Southern colony. The plantation regions were the areas of the South which were most like the imperial world and, therefore, the colonial nuclei. A few years prior to the 1954 *Brown* decision, Key wrote:

The hard core of the political South—and the backbone of southern political unity—is made up of those counties and sections of the southern states in which Negroes constitute a substantial proportion of the population. In these areas a real problem of politics . . . is the maintenance of control by a white minority. The situation resembles fundamentally that of the Dutch in the East Indies or the former position of the British in India. Here, in the southern black belts, the
The new underdeveloped countries that emerged from the colonial empires after the Second World War are unable to escape the plantation system and its effects; the same seems true of the plantation regions of the American South. In certain respects, the lower Piedmont, the Black Belt, the Loess Plains, and the alluvial Mississippi Valley have more in common with the former colonies of the Caribbean and Central and South America than with the metropolitan United States. Whether the agricultural system is extinct or viable, the legacy of the plantation lingers in its effects on the economy, the social structure, and the political system. Some scholars maintain that a “‘colonial economy’ no longer exists because ‘outsiders’ have so thoroughly penetrated the South that both the people and the economy have lost their distinct identities.” But the impact of outsiders has focused on metropolitan areas, especially on major ones such as Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas–Fort Worth. Large parts of the plantation regions have not shared significantly in the alien invasion, even the one related to new factories. For many, most of the “Egypt land” of the South remains terra incognita, a remote nonmetropolitan domain still shrouded in myth and misapprehension.

The civil rights movement can in certain respects be interpreted as a black nationalist struggle. It was part of the anticolonial endeavors that swept the world following the Second World War. The similarities between the civil rights movement in the American South and independence struggles in world colonies, especially those by blacks in the Caribbean and Africa, did not escape black leaders. “Sure we identified with the blacks in Africa,” remembered John Lewis. “They were getting their freedom, and we still didn’t have ours in what we believed was a free country.” Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power* was the most overt contemporary effort to tie the civil rights movement to anti-imperialism that rocked the colonial world. For Carmichael and Hamilton, the “colony” of the United States was not a place but black people, and colonialism was “institutional racism.” “Objective relationship” was what mattered, “not rhetoric (such as constitutions articulating equal rights) or geography.” Colonial status had distinct political, economic, and social aspects, which operated in different geographical settings, ranging from Southern cotton plantations
to the “dark ghettos” of the nation’s metropolises. Cheap labor was the principal commodity of the United States’ black colony. Like independence leaders in world colonies, civil rights workers in the Southern plantation regions thought that freeing a dependent population from the oppressive agricultural system was fundamental to improvement of lives. “The problem is the depressive, impoverishing, circularly-indebting cycle of the plantation system,” wrote two SNCC members who committed themselves to extended work among blacks in Holmes County, Mississippi. “The goal is to release the impoverished from that system and provide them the opportunity of gaining and maintaining their economic freedom.”

In certain respects, recent changes in the South’s plantation regions are similar to those of new nations that emerged from world empires. A syndrome of economic characteristics, which Latin American scholars of the dependency school term “dependent underdevelopment,” distinguishes the new Caribbean nations that emerged from the colonial plantation empires. Political independence has not brought economic independence; limited success has been achieved in economic development and diversification efforts; consumption absorbs most of the gross domestic product; and much recurrent expense is financed by foreign grants and development assistance. Beckford observed that “each type of plantation . . . has its own inherent characteristics that create social diseconomies in plantation society. But a general pattern seems to emerge. In all cases the social diseconomies find ultimate expression in a rather unique combination of resource underutilization alongside underconsumption and poverty among the majority of people in plantation society.”

As Third World countries have been unable to escape the plantation system and its effects, so the plantation regions of the American South have not eluded the consequences of the agricultural system. Dependency and underdevelopment are what Phillips and Raper foretold. At the close of the twentieth century, the South’s plantation regions still share certain characteristics of the plantation America culture sphere. Despite amelioration of segregation and discrimination, these postcolonial areas continue to have multiracial societies and structured caste lines. Planters, timber companies, factories, and government agencies participate in the control and manipulation of the socioeconomic and political structures. Even newly elected black officials in the South, like ones in the Caribbean, often adopt the image of the whites whom they replaced. Dependency, the trait that traditionally characterized plantation workers, now portrays large areas of the plantation regions. The dependent economy is distinguished by low wages, insufficient economic diversification, shortage of local development
FIG. 13.1. The aftermath of the civil rights movement. A boarded-up pre–Civil War house in the white residential core of Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1987. Charles S. Aiken

FIG. 13.2. The aftermath of the civil rights movement. Abandoned United Methodist Church building in Cruger, Holmes County, Mississippi, falling into ruin, in 1985. After disagreements with the United Methodist Church over desegregation, former members formed an independent Methodist Church and constructed a small building nearby. Most Methodist congregations in Mississippi remained with the United Methodist Church. Charles S. Aiken
capital, creation of few new enterprises, and inadequate economic linkages to the growth sectors of the national and international economies. Large areas of the regions are capable of attracting job-creation facilities only from the bottom sector of the economy or facilities that have social, environmental, or economic stigma. Such conditions exist whether the local plantation economy is still viable or whether it is extinct. The Yazoo Delta has a strong modern agricultural economy and a relatively large underemployed labor force that cannot be absorbed by the agricultural system. In the Alabama Black Belt, the agricultural economy is largely gone, and a new type of local economy that can fully assimilate the underemployed population has not developed.

The postcolonial interpretation of the Southern plantation regions is supported by landscape features. As in former colonial areas, the new settlement pattern of blacks is one in which former plantation workers and their descendants are concentrated in hamlets and towns just beyond the borders of the old estates. The new settlement pattern is similar to that found in the Caribbean and other parts of the Plantation America culture sphere. Crop agriculture may have disintegrated, but many of the large landholdings remain virtually intact, planted to pine trees or lying idle.

Certain landscape elements are in response to desegregation and political empowerment of a historically oppressed people. As blacks gained access to public facilities of whites, the role of private, segregated facilities grew in importance. Not only did the number of private schools increase, but also the number of private country clubs, swimming pools, and other private places of recreation and entertainment for whites grew. As whites began to abandon historical towns that passed into the political control of blacks, certain icons of the past were protected. Among them are buildings that once housed the institutions of a segregated plantation society, including pre-Civil War houses. Often such dwellings are unoccupied and sometimes are boarded up, but they usually are not sold to blacks (fig. 13.1). Examples of places with such dwellings include Tuskegee, Alabama; Natchez and Holly Springs, Mississippi; and Sparta, Georgia. The white population in some towns and in parts of the countryside has declined to the point that even churches, such as Horeb Church in Hancock County, one of the oldest Baptist congregations in Georgia, and Woodstock Presbyterian Church at Philomath in Oglethorpe County, which was organized in 1794, have been disbanded and their edifices forsaken. Among the abandoned church buildings are those of congregations rent asunder over the issue of desegregation, such as the United Methodist Churches at Webb and Cruger, Mississippi, whose former buildings are falling into ruin (fig. 13.2).
The plantation landscapes are also littered with abandoned and modified school buildings, which are among the most overt testimonies to the end of legalized segregation (fig. 13.3). Deserted campuses of Jim Crow–era colleges, such as that of Mississippi Industrial College in Holly Springs, are striking landscape emblems. Massive desegregation caught the badly underfunded Mississippi Industrial in the midst of campus renovations and additions. The all-black college could not compete once the inexpensive Mississippi community colleges were opened to all. The partially completed addition to the gymnasium sits as a stark landscape symbol of the end of racial segregation as partially unfinished planter mansions, such as Longwood in Natchez, stand as monuments to the fall of slavery.

New public buildings that house government services stand in stark contrast to older edifices. In the postcolonial world, the number and quality of government services vary from country to country and, in part, are dependent upon external agencies, such as the United Nations and the World Bank. In the plantation regions of the American South, new public health clinics, welfare and subsidized-housing offices, fire and police stations, and government administrative centers are frequently new structures built with federal funds. Such edifices, from the striking, new modernistic city hall in Tuskegee, Alabama, to the large new health center in the midst of cotton and soybean fields north of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, do not bespeak the poverty that surrounds them (fig. 13.4, 13.5). Also scattered

FIG. 13.3. The landscape of desegregation. Abandoned school building, Hale County, Alabama, in 1987. This building is typical of ones constructed during the 1960s to create “equal” as well as “separate” facilities, but mass desegregation caused most whites of the Black Belt to flee the public schools. Charles S. Aiken
across the landscape of the plantation regions are objects associated with new postcolonial economic development efforts. These range from the sign on the side of an abandoned building in Crawfordville, Georgia, advertising industrial sites, to the new catfish processing plant just east of Sunflower, Mississippi, to the gleaming gambling casinos along the Mississippi River, to the huge hazardous waste landfill near Emelle, Alabama, to the dog race track just off Interstate Highway 59 in Greene County, Alabama, to the empty industrial park at Tuskegee, Alabama, to the new regional prison hidden in the hills just south of Sparta, Georgia, to the vacant buildings and empty lots along the wide, well-paved streets of Floyd McKissick’s failed dream of Soul City near Durham, North Carolina (figs. 13.6–13.8).

Although the postcolonial concept provides a tempting interpretation for the South’s cotton plantation regions, beyond a certain point it becomes a narrow, forced notion that is neither comprehensive nor pragmatic to their interpretation. The plantation regions may have certain analogies to countries that emerged from colonial empires, but, fundamentally, they are not Third World places but places within a great democratic country with one of the world’s strongest economies. The British colonies that became the American South began to differ from other world colonies before creation of the United States. George Washington, a political dissenter, the commander of the Continental army, the first president, and the most significant person in forging the new nation, was a Southern
fig. 13.5. The landscape of the War on Poverty. A new federally funded health center just north of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, in 1987. Charles S. Aiken

slave-owning planter, as was Thomas Jefferson, who authored the Declaration of Independence. Moreover, actual connections between the freedom struggles in world colonies and the civil rights movement in the United States were tenuous. The primary freedom struggle in the United States was fought a century before the civil rights movement over the issue of slavery. In the 1950s and 1960s, American blacks sought independence within the context of a strong democracy and the civil rights guaranteed to citizens by its constitution. Martin Luther King Jr. knew that, “consciously or unconsciously,” the American Negro was “caught up by the spirit of the times... with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers in Asia, South America and the Caribbean.” But he also comprehended that the freedom struggle in the United States was “a special American phenomenon which must be understood in the light of American history.”

Another concept for interpretation of the South’s plantation regions is that they are among the places whose relative geographical situations within the nation have changed over time. One approach is to view the regions within the context of the transformation of the United States from a rural to an urban nation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the nation’s largest companies were related to agriculture and to the extraction of natural resources. American Cotton Oil, American Sugar, and Standard Oil were representative the types of companies which made up the nation’s
corporate structure. Not until 1920, well into the century, did the urban population surpass the rural. Seventy years later, at the close of the century, only 24 percent of the nation’s population was rural and 76 percent urban, and the nation’s economy was dominated by manufacturing and service corporations.

The propensity of Americans to believe the agrarian myth and rural blocs in Congress and state legislatures holding disproportionate power long after the majority of the electorate moved to cities, which were not effectively constrained until after the Supreme Court’s 1962 *Baker v. Carr* decision, delayed conceptualization of the United States as an urban nation. Even comprehensive studies of American urban geography and urban history were post–Second World War phenomena. In the 1960s, a new spatial concept of what long had been the actual relationship between rural and urban in America began to be accepted. The connections between American cities and their rural hinterlands are no longer conceived in the shadow of agrarian myth and rhetoric. As parts of various types of intricate regional, national, and international systems, many functions of American cities are independent of their immediate hinterlands. Cities, especially the nation’s great metropolises, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis–St. Paul, Atlanta, and Dallas–Fort Worth, not agricultural regions, are the economic, social, and political heartlands. Where once farmers, planters, and businessmen of small cities and towns and the rural countryside held the economic and political power, the authority and vigor has shifted to medium-size cities and metropolises. During the last half of the twentieth century the plantation regions, like other of the nation’s agrarian regions, lost much of their remaining power and influence. Not only are the nation’s rural areas, even those with viable agriculture, no longer superior to or even equals of cities, but some, including large parts of the plantation regions, have been left so far behind economically that they are given epithets such as “lagging regions” and “forgotten places.”

The filtering of marginal manufacturing from metropolises, the heartland, into lagging rural regions, the hinterland, is assumed to be the primary stimulus of economic development. Whether this concept is completely accurate or not, strategies to assist lagging regions are geared to the industrial filtering idea. Most of the programs to help the persons residing in such regions emphasize education, job training, and improvements in the infrastructure, primarily the construction of roads and highways. The multiplier effect on funds pumped into an area by factories, together with those from transfer payments and monies of government service agencies,
FIG. 13.8. Quest for a new economy. “Don’t dump on us.” Anti–hazardous-waste-dump sign on a pre–Civil War house in Sparta, Hancock County, Georgia, in 1992. The proposed facility allied whites and blacks of this racially polarized county into two biracial groups that opposed and supported the facility. Charles S. Aiken

is assumed to ripple through the economy and improve the lot of all inhabitants through a trickle-down effect.

One of the most important overlooked aspects of the South’s plantation regions conceived as lagging areas is that significant spatial diversity exists among them and within them. Counties vary in such fundamental traits as age structure of their populations and size of their labor forces. Counties also are not equal in their integration with urban America and greater American society. Small and medium-size cities within the plantation regions, including Athens, Georgia; Montgomery, Alabama; and Jackson, Mississippi, are fundamental to urban integration and ameliorated socioeconomic conditions. Most plantation counties that are on the fringes of such cities and large metropolises including Atlanta, Memphis, and Birmingham also have high levels of integration and socioeconomic well-being. Because of its proximity to Athens, rural Oglethorpe County, Georgia, has a high degree of integration. An alien sojourner driving State Highway 22 through the desolate pine forest between Philomath and Lex-
ington might not immediately comprehend the accessibility to metropolitan America. But if her automobile breaks down near the site of the Barrow family's Sylls Fork Plantation, the tiny cordless telephone in her purse and the small computer on the automobile's back seat put her in instant contact with other places in the United States and the world. However, parts of the old plantation regions, even some counties close to metropolises, remain relatively remote from urban America, though they may be spatially close. The areas include the southeastern part of the lower Georgia Piedmont, the western Alabama Black Belt, the southern Yazoo Delta, and a portion of the Natchez district. Not only are such counties isolated, but they are dysfunctional places.

The fundamental problems of the places left behind, including large parts of the cotton plantation regions, are not ones caused primarily by exploitation from without, as is assumed by the postcolonial model, but ones that are a result of leadership failure from within. This failure may be Faulknerian, resting in the inertia and obstructionism of narrow-minded scions of old planter families, such as the Compsons and the McCaslins, and in the Varners and Snopes, greedy, short-sighted descendants of poor whites who arose within the leadership vacuum. In part, the failure may also rest within the black community. Political empowerment did not guarantee that aggressive and effective black leaders would emerge in every place in the plantation South. Although legacy of discrimination, inferior segregated schools, and denied political participation still cast their shadows over the plantation counties, increasingly blacks have had more chances to become masters of their own fate.

No simple solution exists for the social and economic problems that persist in the plantation regions. In the short term, most areas of these regions will continue to need significant financial assistance from federal and state governments. In the long term, the underlying solution to their problems, in large part, lies in that which the former slaves and white Southerners who dissented with the New South race creed looked to, education. Public education in most counties and municipalities of the plantation South still has a long way to go to achieve even average national standards. Not only does the historical problem of chronic underfunding persist, but improvements must be made within a national context that has witnessed many questionable, ineffectual practices sold since 1970 under the guise of education and teaching reform. Education improvements in the plantation regions depend, in part, on changes in prevailing philosophies of public education at the national level.

For many persons, blacks and whites, the plantation South remains a
depressing place, among the least desirable in the nation in which to live and hardly a place to visit. Many young persons still view leaving the place of their birth, not as going away from home, but as escape. Yet, others, even some well-educated blacks and whites, tell you that the plantation South is the best place in the United States in which to live. They speak of family and friends, of the beauty of the countryside, of recreational opportunities, and of the friendliness of the people. But what most do not usually perceive, even those who are loners, is that which is really the most important to them. In a plantation society, even one that is rapidly receding, you cannot be anonymous, for everyone is known. And you do not have to concern yourself with creating your place in that society, for from birth it is largely defined for you.

At the end of the twentieth century, race relations in the plantation regions are improved significantly from what they were at midcentury. The codes of segregation and conduct dictated by a plantation society are disappearing, replaced not by true integration but by a mutual tolerance of one race for the other and by new forms of de facto segregation. The veil separating the races is not destroyed but merely adjusted and rehung. The failure of members of the two races to communicate effectively with one another, a failure during the New South era which Faulkner attempted to capture in *Go Down, Moses*, persists in the Modern South in a deceptively altered form. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream that one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood appears to have come to pass in that whites and blacks now sit around tables to discuss political, economic, and, sometimes, social matters. But at the conclusion of the twentieth century, the brotherhood of King’s connotation hardly exists, and, unfortunately, lack of real communication and understanding between the races persists, not just in the old Egypt land of the South but throughout America.