

HISTORIC PAPERS ON THE CAUSES OF THE CIVIL WAR

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The Old South

by Eugenia Dunlap Potts

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No pen or brush can picture life in the old Southern States in the ante-bellum days. The period comprehends two hundred and fifty years of history without a parallel. A separate and distinct civilization was there represented, the like of which can never be reproduced. Socially, intellectually, politically and religiously, she stood pre-eminent, among nations. It was the spirit of the Cavalier that created and sustained our greatness. Give the Puritan his due, and still the fact remains. The impetus that led to freedom from Great Britain, came from the South. A Southern General led the ragged Continentals on to victory. Southern jurists and Southern statesmanship guided the councils of wisdom. The genius of war pervaded her people. She gave presidents, cabinet officers, commanders, tacticians and strategists. Her legislation extended the country's territory from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

A writer aptly says:

For more than fifty formative years of our history the Old South was the dominating power in the nation, as it had been in the foundation of the colonies out of which came the Republic, and later in fighting its battles of independence and in forming its policies of government. * * * Whatever of strength or symmetry the republic had acquired at home, or reputation it had achieved abroad, in those earlier crucial days of its history, was largely due to the patriotism and ability of Southern statesmanship. Why that scepter of leadership has passed from its keeping, or why the New South is no longer at the front of national leadership, is a question that might well give pause to one who recalls the brave days when the Old South sat at the head of the table and directed the affairs of the nation.

There was the manor and there was the cabin. Each head of the house was a potentate in his own domain – an absolute ruler of a principality as marked as in feudal times, without the despotism of the feudal system.

The plantation of the old regime was tastefully laid out for beauty and productiveness. Flower gardens and kitchen gardens stretched away into the magnificence of orange trees, shady avenues and fruitful plants. Unbroken retreats of myrtle and laurel and tropical foliage, bantered the sun to do his worst. Flowers perfumed the air; magnolia bloom and other rich tree flora regaled the senses; extensive orchards yielded fruit of all kinds adapted to the soil and climate; vineyards were heavy with much bearing. Fields were carefully cultivated, till such a thing as the failure of crops was almost unknown. It was largely supplied with sheep and their wool, with geese, ducks, turkeys, guinea fowls, and every variety of poultry without stint. Eggs were gathered by the bushel, myriads

of birds clouded the sun, and daily intoxicated their little brains with the juice of the black cherry. Herds of cattle were luxuriously pastured by Pompey and his sable mates.

There were quantities of rich cheese, fresh butter, milk and cream. Vast barns were gorged with corn, rice and hay; hives were bursting with honey; vegetables were luscious and exhaustless; melons sprinkled and dotted many acres of patches; shrimp and fish filled the waters; crawfish wriggled in the ditches; raccoons and opossums formed the theme of many a negro ditty. Carriages and horses filled the stables, and splendid mules were well-fed and curried at the barns. High up on the cypress trees hung the grey moss with which the upholsterer at yon market place replenished his furniture vans. The farm produce alone yielded six or seven thousands a year, while the plantation crops of cotton, sugar, and rice were clear profit. Rows of white cabins were the homes of the colored citizens of the community. An infirmary stood apart for the sick. The old grandams cared for the children. Up yonder at the mansion house Black Mammy held sway in the nursery; Aunt Dinah was the cook; Aunt Rachel carried the housekeeper's keys; while Jane and Ann, the mulatto ladies' maids, flitted about on duty, and Jim and Jack "tended on young marster and de gemman." Such hospitality as was made possible by that style of living can never repeat itself in changed conditions. Grant that these conditions are improved. Grant that the lifted incubus of slavery has opened the doors for the march of intellectual and industrial progress; the fact remains that the highest order of social enjoyment, and of the exercise of the charming amenities of life, was blotted out when the old plantation of Dixie land was divided up by the spoils of war.

It is interesting to read of the first attempt at a sugar crop in Louisiana by a Frenchman named Bore in 1794. His indigo plant, once so profitable, had been attacked and destroyed by a worm, and dire poverty threatened. He conceived the project of planting sugar cane. The great question was would the syrup granulate; and hundreds gathered to watch the experiment. It did granulate, and the first product sold for twelve thousand dollars – a large sum at that time.

The maker of the cotton gin worked another revolution in commerce, and rice proved to be an unfailing staple. Armies of negroes tilled the soil, and were happy in their circumscribed sphere, humanely cared for by the whites.

Enter the home and lo! a palace greets you. Massive mahogany furniture, now, alas! in scattered remnants, meets the eye at every turn. Treasures and elegant trifles of many lands attest the artistic taste of the owners. Gorgeous china, plate and glass are there in everyday use. Fruits of the loom in rarest silk and linen, embellish the chambers and luxury sits enthroned. The chatelaine, gracious and cultured, is to the manner born: and from season to season she fills her house with congenial people who are invited to come, but not, as with present house parties, told when to go. As long as they found it comfortable and convenient the latchstring was out. A guest was never permitted to pay for anything; expressage, laundry and all incidentals were as free as air. The question of money, nowadays impertinently thrust forth, was never hinted at in the olden time. It was considered bad form, and the luckless boaster of “how poor he was” would have been properly stared at as a boor as well as a bore.

For pastimes men had fishing and hunting, and for

women there were lawn games and indoor diversions. Speaking of the women of the South a writer aptly said: "They dwell in a land goodly and pleasant to the eye; a land of fine resources, both agricultural and mineral; where may be found fertile cotton fields, vast rice tracts, large sugar plantations, bright skies and balmy breezes. The whole land is plowed by mighty rivers, is ribbed by long mountain chains, and washed by the sea."

Fitting environment, we add, for the gorgeous residences, notably in Georgia and South Carolina, built by the nobility and gentry of the republic, and inherited by the descendants of the old colonial aristocracy. What wonder, that they held themselves aloof from the manual laborer, black or white, and that they were uncontaminated by the attrition of commercial competition. In the summer the family sought the cooler climate of old Kentucky or Virginia, or farther north to Saratoga, Long Branch, or some one of the then attractive resorts. They travelled in state, frequently bringing the family coach, and never without a retinue of servants. What a sensation they made! And money flowed like water. The young men, rich and idle, paid court to pretty girls, sure of a welcome from both parents and daughters, for to marry a Southern planter was to achieve a social victory for all time to come. The mechanical and athletic age had not yet dawned. The accepted escort must be a professional man, or else lord of a domain such as I have described. Pride and prejudice blinded judgment, and the aristocracy of merit alone was unappreciated.

And yet the Southern woman, even of great wealth, could not afford to be idle. She was not, save in exceptional cases, the useless, half-educated, irresponsible creature she has been represented. Some there are always

and everywhere whose lives are given over to fads, fancies and frivolities. But the true mothers were priestesses at the home altar, and kept the sacred fires bright and burning. Their duty was to keep others busy, and to direct and oversee the vast domestic machinery of the home.

Their views were somewhat narrow, for as yet the bright sun of woman's emancipation was barely peeping over the horizon. Their minds did not grasp the vexed questions of theology, politics, or economics. They accepted the faith of their fathers, and shifted all burdens to stronger shoulders. They were eminently religious and charitable. Ways and means were at hand, and they did not bother their brains with isms and ologies. Regular attendance upon the nearest church, and reverence for the clergy, were prominent in their creed.

Education for the masses was not provided, as it is now; but the majority of the better class were finely educated, either at Northern schools, or by the governess, and tutor at home. In many cases where the wife was widowed, she nobly and intelligently arose to the management of business affairs. If misfortune came, and the woman felt obliged to earn a livelihood, it did not occur to her to seek it behind a counter or in a workshop as we do in this generation. She was inclined to walk in the old paths, and follow old customs. They believed their own skies were bluest, their own cornfields greenest, their tobacco finest, their cotton the whitest on earth. They were devoted to old friends, to old manners and customs, and gloried in their birthright.

In the line of literary productions the South was backward. Augusta Evans Wilson's remarkable novels, *Beulah*, *St. Elmo*, and others, were read and re-read, not for any lasting good, but for passing interest, and largely

for the glamour that invested a Southern writer. Madame Le Vert produced *Souvenirs of Travel*, among the very earliest of books on European scenes. Marion Harland's works were read, and possessed the selling quality notwithstanding the bitter taste left by her humiliated heroines. Caroline Lee Hentz, Mrs. Holmes, Mrs. Southworth, and a small army of essayists in the field, clamored for recognition; but time was when to see the Southern woman in print was an innovation displeasing to the household gods. Time came when the slumbering faculties were stirred into splendid and successful activity. The depth of the natures hitherto unsounded arose to the new demands right valiantly. We behold its fruits in the rearing of splendid monuments, the erection of noble charity institutions, the endowing of colleges, the equipment of missionaries, the awakening of wide philanthropies, and in the higher lines of Christian endeavor. The men who shouldered arms, from father to son, to defend their States rights, were the same who, in times of peace, knew no burdens of life save those they voluntarily assumed. The women who sewed night and day upon garments for field and hospital, were the same who were wont to employ their white hands with fragile china and heirloom plate, or dally with needlework in the morning room. These were the mothers who, standing by the slaughtered first-born, gave his sword to the next son, and bade him go at his country's call. There was the spirit of heroism not surpassed by the heroes of the sterner sex. They suffered privations and terrors without a murmur.

To visit one of these ante-bellum homes was a privilege indeed. And something of the spirit of the *caille* of the French revolution must have animated the foreign hordes, who, not content with confiscating these

captured palaces, ruthlessly cut and destroyed the richness and elegance they were beholding for the first time in their commonplace lives. It was not the spirit of conquest, but of vandalism, that animated them. Wanton destruction and not spoliation, common in war tactics, was their watchword. A domain fairer than Elysium opened to their astonished gaze, whenever they penetrated some sylvan grove where stood the plantation manor house.

Alas! for the old plantation days! Alas! for the easygoing spirit that marked the times! The long, pitiless, hot sun-days were not inspirers of extraordinary energy. Yankee thrift was as pigmy play to these owners of bursting coffers. The hurry and bustle of our Northern neighbors was an unknown quantity in their economy. It is to the forcible wresting from the South of their inherited institutions, of the machinery which made their social order possible, that the land of Dixie owes the prosperity and thrift of to-day. Evil was done and good came therefrom. Years of wasted substance and enforced poverty were groped through, till at last the day-star rose upon new industries. Hands and feet and awakened faculties spring to the keynote of progress, and "Our days are marching on."

[Here were inserted in the manuscript twenty pages from the diary of the Historian, written when, as a school girl, she visited with her parents some of the sugar plantations of Louisiana. They give the picture by an eyewitness of the social and commercial life in the South; but while, perhaps, interesting in the reading of a paper, are not necessary, in print, to the theme.]

Future generations may hug to themselves the consolation that we were pulled down only to be built up again in greater prosperity, under a different order of things.

The tears and woes of the old South may change into smiles and good cheer, forgetting the glory that once encircled us like a radiant halo. But many there are who feel that "Such things were, and were most dear to us!" These look back with brimming eyes, and force down the rising sob, as they sorrowfully murmur, "My native land, good night."