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[Introduction to] The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction

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THE OXFORD BOOK OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH

TESTIMONY, MEMORY, AND FICTION

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The Old South

During the seventeenth century the beleaguered military outpost of Jamestown slowly spread into ragged tobacco farms. Indentured servants from Britain did much of the work, though slaves from Africa became increasingly common in towns and on plantations. Disease, warfare, and demoralization reduced the presence of native peoples, while the Europeans lived longer and saw more of their children survive. Trade, farming, and land speculation made many white men prosperous.

The Southern colonies became ever more wedded to slavery while the institution became more marginal in the areas to the north. Hundreds of thousands of Africans, kidnapped or taken in war, eventually found themselves in the ports of Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana. They labored as slaves in tobacco fields, rice swamps, and cane rows. They worked in imposing mansions and in raw cabins, in village shops and on remote farmsteads. Africans gradually became African Americans, forming families and blending their diverse languages and religions into something new and sustaining.

The owners of the slaves became the richest men and women in the British mainland colonies and the leaders of the revolution against the mother country. They wrote the founding documents and led the new nation through its first tentative decades. Though not proud of slavery, the leaders of the South saw no pressing need to abolish the institution immediately; it appeared to be on its way toward a very gradual end, as it was in the North. They agreed that their involvement in the world slave trade would end at the beginning of the new century.

Cotton and Eli Whitney's cotton gin changed everything in the nineteenth century, including white Southerners' vague vision of slavery's demise. The crop grew luxuriantly, its potential stretching as far to the southwest as anyone could imagine. The Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw peoples, standing in the way, were driven or enticed off the land. The world longed for cotton and the need for labor seemed limitless on the frontiers of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Virginia and the Carolinas supplied that labor, selling thousands of slaves every year to the booming states farther south. Restless white farmers moved their wives, babies, and slaves to the freshest cotton land. Churches and courthouses went up in one new county after another, bringing tenuous order to the rough society piling in around them. The two-thirds of white

people who owned no slaves watched both slaveholders and slaves warily. Generally, though, common whites did much as they pleased.

Lines quickly hardened between the regions after 1820, creating The North and The South. Many white Northerners felt affronted by the growing numbers and power of the slaveholders; some, coming to consider slavery not merely archaic but sinful, advertised their beliefs to the world. White Southerners abandoned any public ambivalence about slavery, explaining to themselves and to others that black people were fit only for servitude, that the rich and powerful South was part of God's plan for the spread of Christianity and progress. White Southerners, proud, defensive, and defiant became ever more conscious of themselves as a people set apart from their fellow citizens.

White people and black people made elaborate, lopsided, and unspoken bargains with one another. Slaveowners would keep slaves' families together and protect them from violence at the hands of other whites; African Americans would work and appear contented. Many on both sides violated the bargain. Slaveowners often sold, abused, and violated slaves; slaves fought back, in ways both obvious and hidden. The whites who held no slaves sometimes seemed eager to join in the bargain; at other times, they became fearful and resentful of black and white alike. The white women of the South, told that they benefited from slavery, nevertheless worried about temptations the institution presented to their sons and husbands. The slave South, apparently so simple, was in fact complicated top to bottom, constantly changing, continually shifting beneath people's feet.

The selections that follow describe this society from fourteen different perspectives, mixing devotion, outrage, humor, sadness, and confusion. They range from an eighteenth-century naturalist's evocation of a southern Eden, to a slave woman's description of the hell created by a sexually abusive master, to a 1986 novel imagining the bonds between a young runaway slave mother and a white woman abandoned by her husband. Slavery appears here from the perspective of a young African seized from his home, from Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment-era speculations on racial differences, and from a heartfelt defense of bondage on the grounds of divine will. The selections include the journal of a devout traveling minister, the religious visions of the leader of the largest slave revolt in the nation's history, and a white novelist's interpretation of that revolt. Several selections tell of fights: one for frontier bragging rights, one for the dignity of a slave, and one feud over nothing in particular. Two Southerners, writing eighty years after the fall of the slave South, wrestle with the mysteries of that time and place, sifting through the memories and stories, trying to learn how such things came to be.