**Antebellum Period**

**Antebellum Period summary:** The “Antebellum Period” in American history is generally considered to be the period before the civil war and after the War of 1812. It was characterized by the rise of abolition and the gradual polarization of the country between abolitionists and supporters of slavery. During this same time, the country’s economy began shifting in the north to manufacturing as the Industrial Revolution began, while in the south, a cotton boom made plantations the center of the economy.

**The Cotton Economy In The South**

In the South, cotton plantations were very profitable, at least until overplanting leached most of the nutrients from the soil. Advances in processing the fiber, from Eli Whitney’s cotton gin to the development of power looms and the sewing machine, increased the ability to meet demands for cotton in Europe and the mills of New England. Plantation owners were able to obtain large tracts of land for little money, particularly after the Indian Removal Act was passed in 1830. These plantations depended on a large force of slave labor to cultivate and harvest the crops—most white farmers in the 19th century wanted and were able to obtain their own farms as the U.S. expanded south and west, and slaves not only provided a labor source that couldn’t resign or demand higher wages, their children insured that the labor source would continue for generations.

The demand for slave labor and the U.S. ban on importing more slaves from Africa drove up prices for slaves, making it profitable for smaller farmers in older settled areas such as Virginia to sell their slaves further south and west. Most farmers in the South had small to medium-sized farms with few slaves, but the large plantation owner’s wealth, often reflected in the number of slaves they owned, afforded them considerable prestige and political power. As the quality of land decreased from over-cultivation, slave owners increasingly found that the majority of their wealth existed in the form of their slaves; they began looking to new lands in Texas and further west as places where they might expand their holdings and continue their way of life.

**Early Industrialization and the Rise in Manufacturing in the North**

The early industrial revolution began with textile (fabric) industry in New England, which was revolutionized by Samuel Slater. Slater was a former apprentice in one of Britain’s largest textile factories who immigrated to Rhode Island after learning that American states were paying bounties to people who could help *copy* British textile machines because the British government forbade the export of the machines or emigration of people with knowledge of them. In 1793, Slater opened the first fully mechanized mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. His system of independent mills and mill towns spread through the Blackstone Valley into Massachusetts.

In the 1820s, Slater’s system was replaced by the more-efficient Waltham system. The Waltham system included power looms in the mill, rather than Slater’s practice of having weaving done at local farms. The Waltham system also included specialized, trained employees to run the looms—mainly young women—giving rise to the concept of wage labor, which gradually began overtaking previous forms of labor, such as apprenticeship and indentured servitude, family labor, and slavery in industrialized areas. A population shift from farms to cities had already begun, and the promise of better income in factory jobs accelerated that movement.

Manufacturing advances were not limited to the textile industry alone. Similar advances occurred in other industries, including the manufacture of equipment, machinery, furniture, paints, paper, and glass. Every part of American industry and production was affected.

**Penny Press and Affordable Newspapers**

Among the areas benefitting from advances in technology was the printing business, in particular, the printing of newspapers. Most newspapers in the early 19th century cost six cents a copy and were affordable only to the upper classes, though a barter system often allowed readers to trade rags, whiskey or other goods for a subscription. Printing presses were still hand-powered and essentially unchanged from Gutenberg’s original design until 1810, when German printer Friedrich Koenig patented the steam-powered press. In 1843, American Richard M. Hoe made a further improvement with the rotary printing press, which arranged the material to be printed on a cylinder rather than a flat plate, allowing a much larger volumes of material to be printed—millions of copies in a day rather than thousands—at a lower cost. These advances led to a rise in the number of newspapers published, with more available at prices affordable to the working class—by 1860, about 3,000 newspapers were published in the U.S. with a circulation of roughly 1.5 million, in comparison with about 500 newspapers with a circulation of about 3,000 in 1820.

Papers were often read aloud in homes, bringing news of the government, politics, and local events. Significant speeches were sometimes printed in their entirety, giving politicians and social activists a much wider audience. Stories from one newspaper might be reprinted in others, sometimes with local commentary or counter-opinions added. The invention of the telegraph meant news from distant places could be spread much more rapidly. Newspapers also relied on news—factual or not—provided in the form of letters to the editor, which were usually unsigned or made use of a pseudonym such as Plato or A True American.

In the 1830s, the "penny papers" led a revolution in journalism. They sold for a penny each, making news and even literacy itself more accessible to the working class. Many stories in the penny papers were sensationalist and embellished (to say the least). Modern tabloids can trace their origins to the penny press—but so can modern mainstream newspapers. As the papers grew in circulation, they increased in size from one sheet to two or more. To fill those pages, editors added reporters with specific beats (writing assignments). Although sensational stories sold a lot of papers, so did opinion pieces. The increase in newspapers opened a new public forum—and means of entertainment—that was accessible to all.

**Canals, Turnpikes, and Early Railroads**

Following the Revolutionary War, business and political leaders recognized the need to further unify the country with roads. Local governments and private turnpike and railroad companies began building roads and canals. The War of 1812 and the rise of internal trade—between southern plantations and northern textile manufacturers—proved that the problem of internal transportation was far from solved and a federal system was needed, but various proposals to fund and build a national transportation system were deemed unconstitutional. The conservative Democratic Party in particular opposed federal funding of internal improvements. Instead, private companies proposed roads and canals, then enticed investors to provide funds for building them. In 1817, construction began on the Erie Canal to link Lake Erie and the Hudson River, inspiring a canal-building boom that lasted into the 1840s when railroads began replacing canals as the most efficient form of transportation. Turnpike companies also experienced a boom—by 1830, more than 10,000 miles of turnpikes were operating in the east. Commissioners were authorized to collect tolls and were responsible for maintaining the stretch of road under their care.

The canal system shortened trade routes into many parts of the interior, and port cities like Baltimore and Philadelphia saw some of their business shifting to ports along canal routes. To compete, they began investing in railroads to reach the interior of the country, starting a railroad boom in the 1830s that would last until the Civil War and begin anew following the war. Railroads grew so quickly in the 1830s that they surpassed the mileage of the canals. Many were short-run railroads built to connect ports with points inland, which were then connected to each other by rail. Railroads were faster, more direct, and more reliable than turnpikes or the canal system. By 1856, the eastern coast was connected by railroad to the western side of the Mississippi, Chicago, and the Great Lakes. As with canals and roads, railroads were built with private funds and generated "subscriptions"— the sale of stocks or bonds.

**Pre-Civil War Slave Rebellions**

Slaves in the U.S. resisted their bondage through many passive forms of resistance, such as damaging equipment, working slowly, or keeping their culture and religious beliefs alive, although that often required secrecy. They also carried out open rebellions, risking everything for freedom. Several plots and rebellions occurred in antebellum America, notably Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800 in Richmond, Virginia; an uprising in Louisiana in 1811; and Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy, which was uncovered in 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina. One of the bloodiest rebellions in U.S. history occurred in August 1829 when Nat Turner organized a slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. About 60 whites were killed and, after the rebellion was put down, the state executed 56 slaves accused of being part of it. Militias and mobs formed in the paranoid chaos that followed and anywhere from 100 to 200 innocent slaves were killed in the aftermath. In response to these rebellions, slave codes and laws that limited slaves’ movements and their freedom to gather in groups tightened considerably. In spite of this, plots and actual rebellions in slave-holding states continued into and through the Civil War. In October 1859, radical abolitionist John Brown led a group of followers in a raid to capture the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), in hopes of arming a general slave uprising. The raid failed and Brown and most of his band were executed, but when Northern abolitionists made him into a martyr, it fed Southern fears that the North wanted to wage a war of extermination on Southern whites. John Brown’s Raid is considered one of the significant milestones on the road to the American Civil War.

**The Pre-Civil War Rise of Abolitionist Movement**

Because of the Second Awakening, some began to see slavery as a sin, with emancipation as the only way to atone for this sin. The Quakers, who believed that all people were equal in the eyes of God, had been speaking out against slavery since the 1600s, forming the first abolitionist group in the 1790s.

In 1833, William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. Although highly controversial with huge, often physically threatening public opposition, by 1840 the society had about 2,000 local auxiliaries with membership estimated to be between 150,000 and 200,000, including freed blacks like Frederick Douglass. Members met, passed resolutions, and publically argued against slavery both in speeches and in abolitionist newspapers. Their tone became increasingly confrontational, condemning slave owners as sinners and advising Americans to ignore the part of the U. S. Constitution that required runaways to be returned to their owners. Many abolitionists helped form the Underground Railroad, leading slaves northward to freedom. Eventually, the society became part of a broader movement toward social reform, and many of its members joined in the movements supporting universal suffrage (right to vote) and feminism. The association of women’s rights with the abolition movement caused many Southerners, including many Southern women, to oppose the women’s rights movement in the 20th century, which nearly resulted in the defeat of the 19th Amendment.

By the 1850s, the Abolitionist Movement had gained enough traction to make Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a bestseller, and it, in turn, led to increased membership in abolition societies. The novel, which paints a realistic picture of slavery, had a huge social impact and inspired many to join the fight to end slavery.

**Effects of the Antebellum Period**

The technological advances and religious and social movements of the Antebellum Period had a profound effect on the course of American history, including westward expansion to the Pacific, a population shift from farms to industrial centers, sectional divisions that ended in civil war, the abolition of slavery and the growth of feminist and temperance movements. Ultimately, this period led America to the brink of its most devastating war – one fought between neighbors and brothers -- the Civil War.