Unit: The Events that Led to the Civil War
Today's Events: The importance of agriculture in antebellum South and South Carolina, the Plantation System, and Cotton Gin

Vocabulary: As we read and discuss as a class,

1. antebellum
2. plantation
3. headright
4. agriculture
5. economic system

Reading: When you hit a stop sign, answer whatever questions you can underneath the reading.

During colonial times, agriculture was the basis of society in South Carolina. The headright method and the availability of slave labor contributed to the establishment of large plantations. By 1860, South Carolina had the highest percentage of slaveholders in the nation. It is important to note that most South Carolinians lived on family or subsistence farms. Most did not own slaves. The majority of slave owners in South Carolina owned only one or two slaves and often worked beside their slaves in the fields. Few slave owners owned large plantations. However, the economic, social, and political systems in South Carolina were based on the institution of slavery.

In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin and South Carolina farmers had a new cash crop. As a result they planted more cotton to increase profits and became even more dependent on slave labor. Now cotton could be planted in the Upcountry and soon the upcountry farmers increased their ownership of slaves. As a result, the elites of the Lowcountry were less fearful of loss of political power to the Upcountry. Since the Regulator Movement (8-1.6), the Upcountry had wanted equal representation in the legislature. In 1810, voting became equal. An amendment to the Constitution gave one vote where one lived to “every free white man of 21.” No longer did a voter have to own property. Nor could a person vote in as many districts as he owned land. South Carolina was the first state to give the vote to all white males over the age of twenty-one. The cotton gin had impacted the lives of slaves and the political rights of white South Carolinians.
Although slave importation (*international* slave trade) was outlawed in 1808, the slave population continued to grow in antebellum South Carolina because of cotton. With ready markets in the textile mills of the North and in England, planters sold cotton at good prices and both southern planters and northern mill owners acquired great wealth either directly or indirectly due to slave labor. Although planting cotton eventually wore out the soil, planters were hesitant to find new crops and instead moved to new lands. The need for new lands played into southern arguments for the westward expansion of slavery.

Plantation life required self-sustaining communities and depended on the institution of slavery for the production of goods and services needed to support plantations. Slaves did the work in the fields and in the plantation houses. They cleared the land, planted, cultivated, harvested and processed the crop, working from dawn to dusk six days a week. Women and children worked in the fields alongside the men under the supervision of a driver or an overseer. Slaves also had a diverse range of skills and might be hired out by the master who would collect the slave’s wages. Other slaves worked in the owners’ homes, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and raising the owners’ children. Since slave owners had a large financial investment in slaves, they were concerned about their property and therefore some treated their slaves comparatively well, although others were brutal. Although the treatment of slaves varied from one owner to another, slaves were consistently denied their freedom and forced to work long hours. Slaves had little time to tend to their own families or to the plots that owners might allow them to cultivate for their own food. They were provided with a minimum of food, clothing, and shelter. Since the law did not recognize slave marriages, families were often separated through sale because of changes in the slave owner’s family or finances. The law also forbade teaching a slave to read and write.

Slaves lived in small cabins with dirt floors not far from the plantation owner’s home (the Big House) so they could remain under the watchful eye of the master. Slaves were constantly monitored to ensure that they did not run away. If they left the plantation, they had to carry a pass. Patrollers roamed the roads on constant watch for escaping slaves. Runaways were pursued and punished harshly when they were captured. Although there were a few slave revolts, the great majority of slaves were forced to confine their protests to work slow downs, surreptitious destruction of the master’s property, and feigned illnesses. Although slaves were often separated from family members through sale, they created extended family ties and found some solace in religion. African Americans converted to Christianity and attended the white controlled church where they heard the preacher tell them that they should be content with their place in the world. However, in secret prayer meetings and in their spirituals, they placed a strong emphasis on freedom.
Questions: Once you hit a stop sign, try and answer whatever questions you can in complete sentences. Then, head back to reading.

1. Why did the headright system convince people to farm in America?

2. Why was there such a dependency on slave labor?

3. How did the cotton gin impact the grown of cotton production in the south?

4. Why were some southerners in favor of expanding westward?

5. What was slave life like in the antebellum South?
6. Describe the class structure of the South?

7. Why were the North and South so divided?

8. At the conclusion of the reading, summarize IN YOUR OWN WORDS, why these events led to a war?