

The Ante-Bellum South: Life on the Plantation

Henry J. Sage (2010)



“For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labor. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever”

Thomas Jefferson—Notes on the State of Virginia

The story of life on the slave plantation in the antebellum South has been told, retold, and told yet again as historians have struggled to wrestle the truth out of a reality that was difficult to understand even in its own time. While a great deal has been written about the history of the “peculiar institution,” uncovering the details of life among the slave population has proved to be elusive, for various reasons.

First, the history of slavery in the American South was often portrayed inaccurately both by those familiar with the institution and those opposed to it. The strongest defenders of slavery saw it as a positive good and in keeping with God’s order of things. Those who sought to abolish slavery condemned it as an unmitigated evil. From both ends of that spectrum, exaggerated descriptions of slavery were likely to occur. In fact, there is no single description of slavery that suits every situation or every region of the South. Slavery in the border states of

Maryland, Virginia and Kentucky, for example, was not likely to be as harsh as slavery in the deep South, farther from free territory, in areas where larger plantations existed.

To complicate the matter further, interpretations and reinterpretations of the history of slavery have been driven by scholarly and social trends, with the result that descriptions of the institution have often been biased in favor of the point of view of the writer. In addition, while voluminous records of life in the South exist, those records are incomplete or under-representative of certain aspects of slavery. For example, the large majority of slave owners owned relatively small farms and few slaves. The average number of slaves per plantation was about ten, but that number must be reckoned against a substantial number of plantations on which a hundred or more slave laborers existed. On smaller plantations there was a high likelihood that the plantation owner might be less than fully literate or too busy to keep detailed records. The small slave-owner's relationship with his slaves was likely to be less harsh than on farms where larger numbers of slaves were supervised by overseers responsible to the master. Furthermore, records of mistreatment of slaves, beatings of slaves of both sexes, the rape of slave women and other abuses were unlikely to be recorded in detail, if at all.

In the years both before and after the Civil War, a mythology grew up around the institution of slavery in the South. The image portrayed in the famous 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, with the kind "Massa" looking after his "contented darkies," surrounded by gallant young men and radiant Southern belles, each attended by a loving black "Mammy," persisted for generations. A passive slave culture persisted in the minds of many, but the reality was that slavery was almost always harsh and cruel under the best of circumstances.

Another image of the antebellum South was of the poorest whites, often

called “crackers” or “poor white trash,” who lived in ignorance and degeneracy in a system that depended upon slavery. Many of those poor whites lived in the hill country away from the cotton areas. Their existence was affected by poor nutrition and resulting bad health. Although they had no stake in the slave system, they nevertheless supported racial division because despite their lowly status, they were still able to look down on blacks.

A reasonably prosperous middle-class of white farmers and businessmen also contented themselves with the labor system of the South, as many of them hoped to move into the slave-owning planter class when they became prosperous enough.

Because the bulk of Southern capital was invested in land, cotton and slaves, the Southern economy had distinct features that centered around life on the plantation. Both black and white women had considerable responsibilities in running the plantation. The image of a leisurely life for wives of prosperous plantation owners belongs to the mythology of the Southern culture. Because slaves were valuable property, the white women on the plantation family were obliged to devote their time to the care of their slaves, often administering basic medical treatment and assisting with the births of slave children. The irony of the reality that children born to slave women often had white fathers, who might be husbands or sons of the plantation mistress, was generally suppressed; such wives generally suffered in silence.



What evidence we have of life among slaves comes to us from reporters both black and white who were articulate enough to make records of slavery as they saw it. One of the most famous eyewitness records was that of Frances Anne “Fanny” Kemble, an English Shakespearean actress who met and married the wealthy Philadelphian, Pierce Butler, while on tour. Butler's wealth derived from a large family slave plantation in Georgia, and when Fanny Kemble first visited the plantation with her husband, she was shocked and dismayed by what she saw. She wrote voluminous letters to friends and kept a journal which was suppressed for some years and finally published in 1863. Once in print, Mrs. Butler’s journal provided a vivid and sympathetic picture of slave life; her descriptions vary between horror at the treatment of slaves, especially slave women who were often required to work long hours even while pregnant or shortly after childbirth, and her frustration with the miserable deportment of the slaves she encountered. Her inability to accept her husband’s role in the practices of slave-owners contributed to the reasons for their divorce.

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[Frederick Douglass](#) and [Booker T. Washington](#) have also provided well-known accounts of their lives in slavery. Many slave narratives, often transcribed by literate blacks or sympathetic whites, have also been published.

As part of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, historians took a fresh look at African-American history and at the institution of slavery. They attempted to filter out the mythology and error in order to arrive at a semblance of truth. Attempts to right past wrongs, either of historiography or of actual historical situations, often caused the pendulum to swing past center. That is not to say that deliberate distortions were frequent, only that the most extreme conditions of slavery were often described in the greatest detail. The result of what some saw as excessive reinterpretation was that yet another round of defenses of the institution of slavery made their appearance.

Perhaps the best way to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the institution of slavery is to acknowledge that it was for many slaves, in the words of Fanny Kemble, a “huge misery.” Although slavery in some form had been part of human societies from the earliest times, by the mid-19th century the very idea of owning another human being as a piece of property had lost legitimacy. Even a society as backward as that of Russia had ended chattel slavery by 1861. And while it is undoubtedly true that many human beings existed in horrible economic straits, in conditions that were in certain ways just as cruel as those of slavery, one’s permanent status in that condition was hardly institutionalized.

It is also true that within the slave culture of the American South, the full span of human relationships was undoubtedly present. There were slave owners and families who treated their slaves, or “servants,” as they were euphemistically called, with at least a modicum of decency. Slave women often nursed white babies and lived in the master's house, where

they enjoyed a comfortable existence. Although forced sexual relations between white slave owners and female slaves occurred with discomfoting regularity, sometimes relations between blacks and whites were in fact loving relationships. Such relationships, however, were always condemned, and although the number of slave children with white fathers formed a significant portion of each generation, the treatment of those children of mixed heritage was uneven. Sometimes they were banished, sold off to rid the owner of evidence of his dalliance; sometimes those offspring were treated with kindness and affection, educated, and set free.

TO BE SOLD & LET
BY PUBLIC AUCTION,
On MONDAY the 18th of MAY. 1829,
 UNDER THE TREES.

FOR SALE,
THE THREE FOLLOWING
SLAVES,

VIZ.
 HANNIBAL, about 80 Years old, an excellent House Servant, of Good Character.
 WILLIAM, about 35 Years old, a Labourer.
 NANCY, an excellent House Servant and Nurse.
 The MEN belonging to "GREEN'S" Estate, and the WOMAN to Mrs. D. SMIT

TO BE LET,
 On the usual conditions of the Hires finding them in Food, Clo' ing, and Medical
 THE FOLLOWING
MALE and FEMALE
SLAVES,

OF GOOD REPUTATION,
 ROBERT BAGLEY, about 30 Years old, a good House Servant.
 WILLIAM BAGLEY, about 25 Years old, a Labourer.
 JOHN ARMS, about 30 Years old.
 JACK ANTONIA, about 40 Years old, a Labourer.
 PHILIP, an Excellent Tailor.
 HARRY, about 27 Years old, a good House Servant.
 LUCY, a Young Woman of good Character, used to House Work and the Nursery.
 ELIZA, an Excellent Washwoman.
 CLARA, an Excellent Washwoman.
 FANNY, about 14 Years old, House Servant.
 SARAH, about 14 Years old, House Servant.

Also for Sale, at Eleven o'Clock,
 Fine Rice, Gram, Paddy, Books, Muslins,
 Needles, Pins, Ribbons, &c. &c.

AT ONE O'CLOCK, THAT CELEBRATED ENGLISH HORSE
BLUCHER,

ADJUDGED PRINTER GOVERNMENT OFFICE.

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None of those factors, however, truly go to mitigate the reality of slavery. On too many plantations regular beatings were routinely administered to slaves who failed to toe the line. The sexual abuse of slave women occurred not only by the forced intimacy of white men, but also by the forced marriages with slave men. Slave women were often required to accept husbands not of their own choosing for breeding purposes. Although the brutal treatment of slaves occasionally reached inhuman levels, barely any evidence exists whatsoever that those who beat slaves unmercifully, even to the point of crippling or to death, were ever punished for their crimes.

It is distressing to note that even in the early 21st century there are those who would make the case that in its time slavery wasn't all that bad. And while it is true that people of African descent in America were not the only ones to suffer under the yoke of slavery, it must be said that in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and on Christian principles, the notion that slavery was a positive good is unsustainable.

It is also important to note that defenses of slavery, just as criticisms of slavery, were often determined by external factors that had little to do with the institution itself. It cannot be claimed, for example, that anything existed inherently in the Southern character that made slavery acceptable to people of the South. Had the economics of slavery, which drove plantation life in the slave states, existed in the northern parts of the country, one must acknowledge that slavery could have taken root there just as firmly. And as abolitionists often pointed out, Northern economic interests were perfectly willing to profit from the institution in various ways, just as Northern political interests were content to live under a government that tolerated slavery and protected it in its founding document.

No one put this dilemma better than Thomas Jefferson when he said,

“We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.”

Economic historian Robert Fogel has written extensively about the institution of slavery, including the economics of slavery. In *Without Consent or Contract, The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1994) Fogel details in an “afterword” what he describes as the moral problem of slavery. Acknowledging that attempts to understand slavery has created “agonizing dilemmas and paradoxes,” Fogel recounts that when he first became interested in the history of slavery, he and a colleague produced a work on the economics of slavery that was attacked on the grounds that it presented slavery in too sympathetic a light. In response to his critics he wrote what he calls a modern indictment of slavery.

In addressing the moral issue of slavery, Fogel believes an indictment should turn on four counts. The first count is that “slavery permitted one group of people to exercise unrestrained personal domination over another group of people.” This charge calls to mind the often quoted dictum of British historian Lord Acton that “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In a country founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and with religious overtones suggesting that all people are equal in the eyes of God, such domination had to be seen as a terrible offense on all grounds.

The second count of Fogel’s indictment of slavery is the denial of economic opportunity. When Jefferson wrote that one inalienable right was the pursuit of happiness, what he meant was the right to make a decent living by any legal and ethical means. Economic rights of individuals imply that every human being should have the right to make his or her own best deal based on the talents with which he or she is born and the industry with which that person hones those talents. Many slaves constrained to working in the agricultural sector might well have

prospered in other environments. In any case, the opportunity for economic advancement for slaves was virtually nonexistent, even on plantations or under conditions where slaves were allowed to earn modest sums to be used for their own purposes.

Denial of citizenship for those bound in slavery is the third count of the indictment. Fogel is referring here to more than just the right to vote and other assumed privileges of citizens. What he really means is that the slave was denied his day in court, that he or she had no legal recourse for the redress of grievances arising from offenses against his or her person. Even those who were denied the right to vote in other societies at that time still had the right to organize, to form organizations and to publicly plead for reform. Citizenship implies all of the rights incorporated in the first ten amendments to our Constitution, and slaves were denied all of those. As the court ruled in the Dred Scott decision of 1857, slaves and their dependents possessed no rights which white people were bound to respect.

The last count of Fogel's indictment is the denial of cultural self identification. Although slaves were able to retain some of the customs brought by their ancestors from Africa, they dared not openly exhibit full expression of their heritage. Slaves could not create a culture of their own; family life for slaves was often fractured by the sale of family members, especially children, and marriages between slaves were generally permitted only with the indulgence of the slave owner. As mentioned above, slave marriages were often forced upon slaves for the purpose of producing slave children, which would accrue to the economic benefit of the master.

In the 21st century, it should be unnecessary to argue that slavery was wrong, even though there are people of apparent goodwill who believe that in its time slavery was certainly an acceptable condition. Certainly it is true that every human being on this planet probably has both slaves

and slave owners somewhere in his or her ancestry. As historian John Hope Franklin has said, slavery was old when Moses was young.

THE ECONOMY OF THE SOUTH

Although cotton was clearly king in the South, it was not the only agricultural product cultivated. Tobacco, rice, indigo, and sugar were also profitable crops which depended on an abundant supply of labor, but the market for cotton produced as much wealth as all the other products combined. The South also produced large quantities of corn, wheat, and other consumables alongside forage for livestock, which the South cultivated in abundance. Although agricultural reforms were attempted in order to counter the depletion of soil brought by the growing of tobacco and other staples, the abundance of virgin land in the more western areas of the South kept many farmers and their slaves on the move.

As the cotton culture spread westward, slavery strengthened its hold on the South. The demand for slaves was greatest in the Deep South, and the Upper South sold its slaves “down the river” at ever higher prices. Slave trading was a lucrative business, but it sometimes led to the breakup of slave families. As the price of slaves increased, only wealthy Southerners could afford to buy them, so by 1860 only one-quarter of Southern families owned slaves. Slavery was profitable, but it kept Southern capital from being invested in trade and manufacturing. Thus development of transportation systems and manufacturing in the South lagged far behind the North by 1850. Furthermore, much of the wealth generated by the cotton economy flowed northward as Northern merchants, bankers, ship-owners and manufacturers derived substantial income from crops produced by slaves that otherwise might have remained in the South. Southern critics of the slave system repeatedly emphasized that fact.

Hinton R. Helper, one such Southern critic of slavery, recognizing the realities of the slave system, wrote in 1857:

In one way or another we are more or less subservient to the North every day of our lives. In infancy we are swaddled in Northern muslin; in childhood we are humored with Northern gewgaws; in youth we are instructed out of Northern books; at the age of maturity we sow our "wild oats" on Northern soil; in middle-life we exhaust our wealth, energies and talents ... giving aid and succor to every department of Northern power; in the decline of life we remedy our eye-sight with Northern spectacles, and support our infirmities with Northern canes; in old age we are drugged with Northern physic; and, finally, when we die, our inanimate bodies, shrouded in Northern cambric, are stretched upon the bier, borne to the grave in a Northern carriage, entombed with a Northern spade, and memorized with a Northern slab! (Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*, University of North Carolina Press, 2001, 22,3.)

At bottom, slavery was a stagnant and inefficient labor system that wasted talent and energy. Since there was no incentive for slaves to work any harder than they had to, they required constant supervision. Tools often broke “accidentally” and thus had to be stronger. Many forms of passive resistance made slave labor far from free. Economic historians have argued over the comparative economic benefits of the Southern slave system and free labor systems. (See for example Stanley L. Engerman and Robert William Fogel, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery*, New York: Norton, 1995.)

The Abolitionist Movement

Slaves have existed in almost every society known to man in one form or another. Ancient Semitic tribes had slaves, the Egyptians had slaves, as did the Romans, Greeks, Spartans and most Western European

nations, well into and past the Middle Ages. Slavery was not invented in modern times, but was inherited as a practice that had always existed. The first African slaves who arrived in North America came to Virginia in 1619, and they were treated more or less like indentured servants. It was only when the enormous demand for labor, especially on the Southern plantations, became apparent that the lucrative African slave trade found its way to America's shores

By the late 1600s the practice of permanent, lifetime slavery was well established by law in Virginia and elsewhere. Early colonial statutes gave virtual life-and-death authority over their property to the owners of slaves. Even though slavery is almost as old as civilization itself, by the beginning of the modern age a number of forces had begun to mitigate against continuation of the ancient practice. Although organized resistance to slavery was slow in coming, modest steps were taken in that direction. For example, in 1688 Quaker church took a stand against the practice of human bondage, the first such declaration in colonial America.

It had become apparent to many Americans by the time of the American Revolution that slavery was inconsistent with the ideals that Jefferson elucidated in the Declaration of Independence. Yet the winning of freedom from Great Britain and solving the problem of slavery at the same time were more than the founding fathers were prepared to tackle. Slavery actually began to wane during and after the Revolution, and many people quite honestly believed that it would gradually wither and die. In any case, in most Northern states, the immediate or gradual abolition of slavery started before 1800.

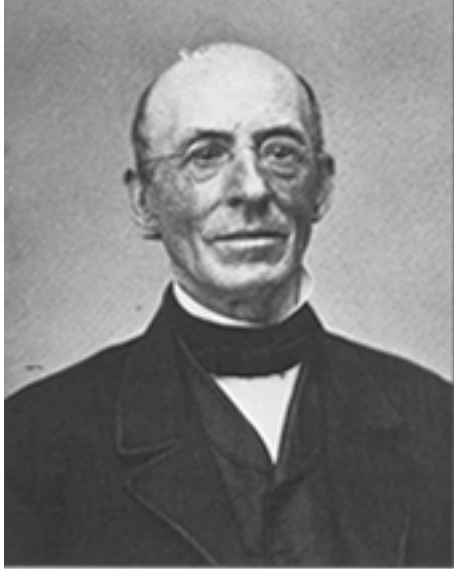
Slavery was a significant issue discussed during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The 3/5 Compromise, later seen by some as a pact with the devil, was a temporary means of addressing the problem so as to make ratification by a majority of the states possible. Few of the

founding fathers admired the institution of slavery, and many of them worried about its future impact in the United States. Some of those like Washington and Jefferson were slave owners themselves; others, like Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, had no use for slavery at all. The clearest condemnation of slavery at the Constitutional Convention came from George Mason, a slave owner. On August 22, 1787, he said:

Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a Country. As nations can not be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes & effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities.

The Civil War was indeed a calamity. Had it not been for the invention of the cotton gin and the booming cotton economy that began to take over the South around 1800, perhaps the desire to continue the practice of slavery would have waned over time. But by 1820 the plantation system and the production of cotton had come to dominate the broad region of the South known as the cotton belt.

The slavery issue reared its head in 1819 over the admission of the state of Missouri. Because there had been agitation in the North against slavery for some time, Southern states were concerned that they might lose their grip on Congress, and slavery might be jeopardized. The Missouri Compromise was a way of keeping the number of slave states and free states even, so that in the Senate the Southern states could block any legislation interfering with what became known as the “peculiar institution.” The Missouri Compromise lasted over 30 years, but it did not resolve the issue of slavery.



GARRISON

By 1830 the abolitionist movement had begun to take hold in the North, especially in New England. William Lloyd Garrison, who became the most outspoken opponent of slavery, gave his first famous speech against the institution on July 4, 1829. As the movement grew and spread, its advocates included many who sought reforms in other areas, such as the treatment of the mentally ill, temperance in alcohol consumption, and greater rights for women. Religious organizations were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement, and the pulpit became a place from which antislavery arguments frequently emanated.

The agitation over slavery was a contentious issue in Congress. The gag orders (mentioned above) were put in place to prevent endless bickering on the floor of the Senate and House. Congressmen such as John Quincy Adams fought against the silencing of the debate over slavery. But since slavery was protected by the Constitution, and since three quarters of the states would have had to ratify any amendment ending slavery, practically speaking, there was little hope of dealing with the institution at the federal level. When the issue finally led to secession, in fact, it was not over attempts to abolish slavery, but only over attempts on the part of anti-slavery forces to prevent its spread. Abraham Lincoln's

election on a platform to that effect led directly to the secession movement.

Although one cannot fault the abolitionists for their desire to see slavery ended, it has been claimed that their agitation did have a negative effect on the overall circumstances of slavery. By declaring that slave owners were unchristian sinners, if not downright devils, they placed the Southern slave owners in a difficult position. They either had to agree with the charges and give up their slaves, which a few did, or they had to come to the defense of slavery in a way that had until then not been necessary. In 1800 there were few Southerners who would have claimed that slavery was a good thing. But by 1850, after decades of agitation, the South had begun to argue that the institution as a positive good.

It has been widely claimed that the agitation on the part of the abolitionists, well meant and morally unassailable, nevertheless in the short term made the problem more acute. According to that logic, it is not a stretch to say that the abolitionists helped create the Civil War. Such claims have been refuted, however: "Despite such unanimity of testimony, the assertion that the pro-slavery argument was an answer to Abolitionism will not stand the light of examination." (W. B. Hesseltine, "Some New Aspects of the Pro-Slavery Argument." *The Journal of Negro History*, Jan., 1936, 1-14.) The full story of the abolitionist movement is still being told, and their actions have been defended a morally justifiable.

Slavery Divides the Nation. All the other issues that divided the North and South, such as tariffs, land sales policy, internal improvements, and even the Bank of the United States, were connected in certain ways with the institution of slavery. For example, manufacturing in the South had been approximately equal to manufacturing in the north in 1800. But by 1850, a vast majority of the manufacturing had moved to the North since most Southern capital had been invested in plantations, slaves and

cotton.. It must be said that the North also profited from slavery because those who financed loans to Southern landowners and those who marketed and traded in cotton were very often Northern merchants or ship owners. Protests against protective tariffs in states like South Carolina were rooted in the fact that the South was reliant on Northern manufacturing for many products.

In 1850 with new land accessions from the Mexican War, the issue of slavery was opened once again. The 1850 Compromise temporarily resolved the issue. Almost immediately afterward, the new, tougher Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, brought the problems of slavery to the North more vividly than ever. The Underground Railroad, which had enabled slaves to escape to the northern states and often on to Canada, was seen by Southerners as a conspiracy to rob them of their economic well-being; thus the Fugitive Slave Act and its strong provisions led to many slave catchers invading the North in search of what they deemed lost property. Very often attempts to bring slaves back to the South were met with resistance. Violence broke out in many Northern areas where freed slaves were being apprehended. Abolitionists sometimes purchased freedom for slaves rather than allowing them to be taken back South. In some ways that fueled the fires more, as Southerners saw that as a means of getting reimbursed for recalcitrant slaves who were known as runners and were therefore undesirable in the first place.