

# Debates Over Slavery and Abolition: Slavery as an Institution

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King, Edward. The great South : a record of journeys in Louisiana, Texas, the Indian Territory, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. Illustrated by James Wells Champney, American Pub. Co., 1875. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EZ0102369782/SAS?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=5c970923&pg=190>.

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## Oppression without History?

In the popular imagination—and in most textbooks and classrooms, too—slavery remains a set of static images, distant and strange: ragged black men and women toiling listlessly over rows of cotton; the soaring columns of a master’s mansion framed by magnolias and Spanish moss; some poor soul suffering at the whipping post, and other souls shouting secretly for liberty in the hymns of “negro” spirituals and the sermons of African American Christianity; wretched families torn asunder on the auction block and others, heroically, striking off slavery’s shackles and following the North Star in a perilous, lonely journey toward freedom. Memorable though they are, these scenes have no beginning, it would seem, no necessary progression, no internal dynamic which might lead toward the downfall of the “peculiar institution.” Eventually, the story goes, change came from outside this timeless plantation world. As cotton’s kingdom neared its natural limits in the 1850s, non-slaveholding white Americans in the northern states turned their hearts and votes against bondage. Abraham Lincoln won the presidency, the South seceded, and slavery collapsed in the carnage of Civil War. Freedom and economic progress triumphed, and the harsh, outmoded, yet ineffably charming world slavery had made was “gone with the wind.”

The merest glance at the rich and varied documents in *SAS*, Part III compels a broad rethinking of the claims and stereotypes which structure this familiar tale. Careful examination shows that slavery as an institution was far more pervasive and deeply rooted than popular memory recognizes, more dynamic and dangerous than scholars have understood. As one ex-slave put it seventy years after emancipation, “de haf have nebber bin tol’.” The collections assembled here from archives and repositories scattered across four continents facilitate a transnational project of retelling the story of slavery’s emergence, growth, and catastrophe in the Atlantic world across four tumultuous centuries. Surprising, confounding, endlessly intriguing, these documents offer a hundred avenues toward a new and distant destination, where slavery and the antislavery struggle come clear in entirely new, more challenging ways.

## History Against Oppression

Three broad themes emerge from careful study. Here, as never before in human history, we see tens of millions of human beings, divided by nation, culture, religion, language, and experience, determined to shape their own lives and build broader ties against the oppression they suffered across all boundaries and barriers. They demanded and labored for better lives: sometimes grabbing individual opportunities at the expense of fellow slaves, other times standing impressively in defense of family and community. There is almost no evidence here that the possibility of revolutionary change, the overthrow of slavery as an institution, ever occurred to these terrorized, hard-pressed people. Yet, throughout the Atlantic world—on the brutal sugar estates of Brazil and the Caribbean, in the deadly rice swamp of the Carolina coast, across the sandy tobacco fields of the Chesapeake and the rich, sickly cotton bottom lands of the Mississippi Delta, even along the mildest margins of slavery’s reach, in Québec, Boston, or New York—enslaved Africans almost never yielded that final concession masters so desperately craved: the admission that their situation as “human chattel” was normal, proper, unchangeable.

Without end, we see in these pages, blacks in bondage did as working people have ever done, toiling as required, and often with a deep sense of human dignity, taking up the weapons of the weak—grumbling, slacking, wangling, sabotaging—and mentally tracing the contours of what a better life might be. Cherishing those dreams, armed with the fragments of an African history half-lost and the puzzling commandments of a range of otherworldly cultures, slaves lived their lives as abundantly and as well as they could. When they could, black women and men slipped free, worked toward freedom, or struck out violently against their overlords. Everywhere, master and man understood that slavery was adversarial—essentially, a “warfare state”—and that what Thomas Jefferson called holding “the wolf by the ears” must ultimately rely upon brute force. The violence, economic exploitation, and dehumanization readers will encounter in *SAS* III must seem appalling—and appallingly random, even casual. Yet it was anything

but: throughout almost all of slavery's history in the Atlantic world, from one end to the other, terror was a deliberate, essential, politically calculated weapon. Monticello itself, that seemingly pristine American temple of reason and liberty, could not have risen apart from it. Thinking of slavery as an institution as we examine the collections in SAS III, then, we must think, first and last, of war—a constant, violent struggle for freedom.

That struggle meant, unsurprisingly, rivers of blood. The good news, if we can call it such, is that almost everywhere in the Atlantic world across the nineteenth century, the conflict between master and slave at the point of production—what military historians now call the low-level style of “uncomfortable warfare” between nations, classes, or groups of asymmetrical power—was peacefully resolved. Eventually, with the stroke of a pen or a democratic vote, slavery passed into oblivion and millions of men and women walked out into freedom—and grinding poverty—without violent opposition. To be sure, there was no end of slave resistance and rebellions of one sort or another throughout this place and time which propelled and galvanized movements for reform, yet only in Haiti in the 1790s and in the Confederate States of America in the 1860s did local conflict turn to sustained, full-scale warfare. In each instance, unsurprisingly, the leap to mass violence launched slavery's bloody demise. Yet even Haiti was just a desperate jailbreak catalyzed by *The Rights of Man*, finally ghettoized and starved of revolutionary power.

But the apparently stupid and ultimately doomed uprising of the American planter class was altogether different. There, after 1820, masters in the seaboard states had trumpeted a new, aggressive paternalist worldview, insisting that between master and man no necessary conflict existed at all. “They belong to us,” one South Carolina planter explained, “we belong to them.” In examining the collections in SAS III—especially the fraught, disturbing, essential interviews with ex-slaves in the WPA narratives—researchers should be alert to the rise of this new, astonishingly arrogant, mutualist ethic not as the transcendence of conflict over slavery, but as its great political climax. Here the hubris—and desperation—of the

Orleans, and that new lands and territories have been opened up to speculation and profit as if by magic. But the plan is not limited merely to this. It is possible that in future the line may extend from where it now joins the Houston and Texas Central railway at Denison, southward, down the valley of the Trinity,



“The Pet Conductor.”

—the richest in Eastern Texas,—to Galveston, with a branch to the waters of Sabine Bay, which route to the Gulf, it is claimed, would save from 700 to 1,200 miles of railway transportation upon all the foreign importations and exportations of the West Mississippi States and Territories, over shipments via the Atlantic ports. The value of the Texas business will also be immense; and should the Missouri, Kansas and Texas railway lines touch the Gulf, there will be travel and trade enough for it and for the International and Great Northern and the Houston and Texas Central, even though they double

their tracks and rolling stock. Besides this, the branch from Sedalia, extending across the Missouri river at Booneville, to Moberly, Missouri, gives a magnificent direct line from Chicago to Galveston.

As the Indian Territory boasts no towns worthy the name along either of the two lines of rail which penetrate its domain, the railroad company placed at the disposition of our party a superb hotel car, equipped with kitchen, drawing, and sleeping-room. The larder of the traveling-home was well stocked, engineer, fireman, and brakeman took their rifles, prepared for an encounter with deer, or to chase the cautious wild turkey; and a merry party, one frosty morning in January of 1873, rattled out of Sedalia. Both artist and writer were fascinated with this perfection of travel, this journeying so thoroughly at one's own will, with power to stop at every turn, and with no feeling of haste. The presiding genius of the train, “the Pet Conductor” and “Charlie,” made the travel through the wilds as comfortable as the journey of an emperor. Wherever it seemed to us good, we dismissed our train to a side track, and wandered off.

The Missouri towns in this section were passed over with a cursory glance, as being so much alike in general character. Windsor was a sleepy place; Calhoun sleeper and older. The latter village was a cluster of ill-looking buildings, grouped around a muddy square. At the time we saw it, there was also snow enough to make it uncomfortable. “Yer ought to see it Sundays,” said an informant at the depot, “when them fellows get full of tangle-foot. They kin just fight!” But the railroad is bringing



“Charlie.”

King, Edward. *The great South : a record of journeys in Louisiana, Texas, the Indian Territory, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland*. Illustrated by James Wells Champney, American Pub. Co., 1875. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FZ0102369782/SAS?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=5c970923&pg=190>.

southern master class drove it to assert slavery's positive benefits to all concerned in a stunning variety of ways which rather sum up the nature of evil itself.

Still slaves fought back, struggling to subvert planter hegemony by holding their oppressors to the highest standards of Christian goodness, humane reason, and mild government that masters asserted as proof of their seeming benevolence. Few owners nearly met the mark, needless to say, though many, self-deceivingly, self-destructively, leapt toward it. Paternalism's strategy demanded concessions and self-criticism on both sides, dragging the struggle over slavery into an incredibly complex, localized conflict waged first for hearts and minds, bodies and souls, black and white both. Degraded by sale

and whip, sexual violence, grueling labor, and simple poverty, bondpeople drew back, at grievous cost. And yet, especially here, paradoxically, African Americans came to stand their ground, absorbing their antagonists' severest onslaught, building community as barricade and cultivating a feeble freedom within its confines. Here, the human spirit was imprisoned and imperiled, defiled and too narrowly defined. And yet liberty's light gained a small, near-shattered space in which to shine. That magnificent, enduring, tiny, flawed achievement must be counted against the long odds enslaved African Americans faced against the masters' paternalist assault on community and consciousness, and the awful toll of women and men who gave way to apathy or despair, self-destructive violence or drink, the fetishism of commodities, or—worst of all—the sincere belief that they were “good” slaves living under a “good” master. Some may find in these pages a political moral for our own times, perhaps.

Even more amazing, others may say, is the emergence in England in the late eighteenth century of a small movement of white men determined to secure the rights and liberties of enslaved men and women an ocean away, to whom they bore only the slightest kinship, from whom they could expect no benefit at all. That the tavern talk of a handful of dedicated oddballs—despised Quakers, altruists like Granville Sharp, zealots like Thomas Clarkson—could spark a hemispheric antislavery revolution which reverberates down to our own times provides a compelling parable for those who claim that they are powerless and that change is impossible. Recent scholarship on abolitionism contrasts a dedicated cadre of skillful, true-believing organizers with a mass of middle-class followers for whom antislavery activism was a self-interested “lifestyle” choice. But there were so many ways to accumulate “moral capital” in Victorian England or Jacksonian America: the documents in *SAS III* urge us to reconsider the cynicism of this get-a-leg-up interpretation of moral reform. Certainly there were social benefits to be gained by opposing slavery at the eleventh hour, and it is easy to write off those who jumped it at the beginning as kooks, doctrinaires, hard-shells, or long-shot artists, but what of those in the

vast middle ground? Who makes revolution, and why, and how, exactly? And who fights back? What led a conservative New England lawyer to stake his reputation on the crazy notion that increased cultivation of beets might be the logical path to the downfall of human bondage? What led an indebted Midwestern tanner like John Brown to dedicate his life to the fight against slavery—and to follow through on that private vow? The collections in Part III provide vast and illuminating opportunities for transnational examination of these questions of reform and revolution.

Thirdly, for those who consider the arc of the arrow of time's flight easily calculated and comfortably contemplated, the documents in *SAS III* must give pause. There are many, many complicated men and women—take Jefferson or Brown as examples—along with events, transactions, stories, betrayals, leaps of faith, and dead ends herein which test the steadiest of understandings of the past. The beguiling villains of the slavery story we know so well—the planter class of the American South—cannot but come off in these pages as so much more villainous than we have imagined heretofore, and more heroic, too. For, in the end, fellows like the despicable, seductive James Henry Hammond do not simply defend their dying world in fratricidal warfare: they champion it as a superior way of life, an antidote against the far more ruthless regime of “wage slavery” which they saw as trampling tradition, family, community, Christianity, civilization, humanity itself. Karl Marx wrote about capitalism, its flaws and its benefits. The Southern master class went leagues further, sincerely risking their lives and their world on destroying a horrid slavery which called and calls itself freedom. We may disagree, but the first step to understanding their world—and the struggle at the center of *SAS III*—is to recognize that these men and women, all of them, believed that they were acting rightly. Oppressors especially: has it not always been so?

### **The Pervasive Institution**

Manifestly, in the mid-nineteenth century, there was good reason for the imagery of an unchanging world of slavery where close distinctions of place or time hardly mattered, of the sort readers will find in so

many traveler's accounts, pro-slavery pamphlets, the letters and diaries of the master class, and in the memoirs of ex-slaves, too. Geographically, slavery has been anything but "peculiar" (a word which Victorians used to mean special or remarkable as well as unusual), developing in variant forms in cultures both "savage" and "civilized," stretching from Iceland to Korea to the Kongo. Temporally, slavery shows up in—and is shored up by—the Jewish laws of Leviticus and the Christian teachings of the Apostle Paul. It ran the first marathon in ancient Greece, told the famous fables of Aesop, populated the Janissary armies which swept Islam into medieval Europe, proved protean and inevitable across thirty centuries of Chinese history. Etymologically, the word slave links bondage to the victimized Slavic peoples of eastern Europe who provided the ideal image of human chattel in the early Ottoman Empire. By 1500, however, most slaves were African, black, and following the flow of money eastward, swallowed up in the thriving commerce of an Indian Ocean mediated by Chinese naval power, dominated by Arab and South Asian traders. It was the vast mineral wealth of the Andes that stoked Europe's inflationary "price revolution" in the sixteenth century, the insatiable hunger of Westerners for sugar and tobacco, and the astonishing, unprecedented problem of cheap, abundant land and scarce, expensive labor in the New World that propelled Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, English—even Danish—colonial enterprise to champion plantation agriculture and chattel slavery. The choice seemed sensible, profitable, inevitable.

By 1800, a vast majority of the world's population still lived and labored in various states of unfreedom: slavery of one sort or another rather rightly seemed to have existed almost everywhere, almost always. No wonder, readers of the collections of SAS III will discover, so many contemporaries considered the ownership of other human beings to be so utterly normal—or overlooked its enormities altogether in praising the wonderful benefits bondage brought to those with the wit and wherewithal to buy into the system. So men on the make have always spoken. And so slavery, peonage, debt bondage, human trafficking still flourish today from the least "developed" to the



Child, Lydia Maria Francis, et al. The American anti-slavery almanac, for Webster & Southard, [c1836-1847]. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FZ0100205732/SAS?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-SAS&id=f4888908&pg=350>.

most industrialized cultures on the globe. What, then, makes *this* slavery, which shaped the Atlantic world from the fifteenth to the late nineteenth century, so particularly worth examining? What are the boundaries, characteristics, and dynamics of *this* institution of slavery?

### Always, Everywhere: a Labor Institution

The history of the expansion of Western civilization—the imputed source of humanism, individual liberty, the rule of law, political democracy, and the dynamic nexus of free markets and universal human rights both—begins with the fifteenth century voyages of

the Portuguese and Spanish southward, “exploring” the coastline of Africa in pursuit of profit, developing plantation agriculture in the islands west of the Iberian peninsula, and, by the early 1500s, taking up in earnest a transatlantic trade in African slaves to build and labor on vast landholdings in Brazil and the lucrative but killing Caribbean. Without great regard to which European flag ruled the waves, merchants sent human cargoes where they expected to realize the greatest profits, and planters paid prices according to their own calculations of the possibilities of labor-value extraction. Across the period 1500–1800, more than ninety percent of all Africans sold into slavery in the Atlantic world wound up in destinations other than British North America. That simple fact must dictate our understanding of the institution of slavery in the Atlantic world: first and foremost, it was a solution to the unanticipated problem of an insufficiency of affordable, reliable white or native labor to till the cheap, fertile, abundant land which Europeans “discovered” in the New World. Unfree labor flowed inevitably toward opportunities to seize the biggest, quickest profits.

With the establishment of plantation agriculture dedicated to the cultivation of a narrow range of export crops—sugar especially, but also tobacco, coffee, indigo, hemp, rice, and (after 1790) cotton, slaveholders bent all aspects of the slave experience toward maximizing market returns. “Sugar is made with blood,” the Cuban planters’ proverb stated, and masters did not hesitate to trade black lives for white gold. Across the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the life span of a newly purchased slave was a mere seven years. Even in the relatively milder conditions of continental North America, reformers in the new United States equated ending the transatlantic slave trade with eliminating slavery from their midst altogether: without a constant supply of fresh victims, enlightened minds reckoned, the barbaric institution would swiftly “die out” in their new land of freedom. Ultimately, that calculation proved egregiously wrong: America’s slave population *quadrupled* from one to four million souls in the three generations before disunion. But this, too, must be attributed both to slaveholders’ determination to reap the greatest profits—coupling

crop production with the lucrative internal trade in human chattel—and black people’s determination to survive and thrive within the bonds of paternalism.

As a labor system, slavery proved abundantly malleable. Africans in bondage toiled as sailors on the ships that crisscrossed the Atlantic, and cleared the forests, drained the swamps, and built the port facilities upon which New World coastal cities arose. They labored at dockside, loading and unloading cargo and trucking it through town, and performed a variety of tasks essential to the life of any urban community, from barbering, laundry, and sexwork to craftwork, clerking, and printing. Beyond the towns and cities, thousands of slaves worked as fishermen, timber workers, ranchers, or miners. Overwhelmingly, however, Africans were enslaved in the New World to supply European and domestic markets with plantation staples. To this end, *SAS III* shows, masters turned their full attention, rationalizing production to maximize output. Though most slaves labored under the gang system, toiling from sun-up to sundown six or seven days a week, by the nineteenth century in portions of the American South and the Caribbean, slaveholders came to allot their “hands” a set daily task of individual work. Once these jobs were completed, a slave might take her leisure, assist others with prescribed chores, sometimes till garden patches they counted as their own, or even perform “overwork” for wages. This “task system” both introduced a measure of freedom within the slave experience and rooted blacks more firmly in bondage. Likewise, across the nineteenth century, we see a growing bifurcation in the “typical” labor experience of slave workers. Across most of the Americas, bondpeople toiled en masse, on plantations which have rather rightly been called “factories in the fields.” In the United States, however, the “average” slave lived and worked within the context of a single nuclear family unit—or entirely alone—surrounded and continually controlled by the owner’s white household. No wonder southern paternalists came to describe slavery as “the domestic institution” and bondpeople as “our black family.” Isolated and almost overmatched, an even greater wonder is that more slaves did not give in to that cruel and twisted logic.

## A Political Institution

Although slavery was rooted in violence—astonishingly so—readers of *SAS III* will quickly discover that rules and logic on both sides of the master/slave relation came to undergird the terror which pervaded slavery as an institution. From formal legal codes to informal plantation rules to customary expectations within the black community, masters and slaves evolved and maintained a logic of government which aimed to minimize disruption and maximize productive labor. In particular instances, planters put their heads together to decide when it was appropriate to burn a slave alive, how to perform the task, and who should pay the bill. In others, masters wrote letters to overseers or gave orders to black “drivers,” commanding that pregnant slaves should not be pushed at their tasks, or that new mothers should be praised and rewarded with “gifts” of cloth and special rations. All of these minute details went toward building slavery as a political institution, with its own dynamic ideology and internal system of rules. Ultimately, what began in the political struggles waged at the level of local farm or plantation across three centuries spiraled upward from those countless nexuses toward the creation of a half-slave/half-free American republic in 1776 and, more ominous still, a full-blown slaveholders’ revolution in 1861. In seeking to understand how republican government swept across the Americas in the Age of Revolution, it is essential to keep one eye trained on the transnational struggle to keep Africans in slavery. In this regard, among the most fascinating resources contained in *SAS III*, the understudied East Florida Collection at the Library of Congress, traces how shifts in law and governance in this region from Spanish to British to French to American rule saw transformations in the practice of slavery at the local level. Likewise, in the remarkable collection of French and British periodicals assembled here, we can trace debates over the political meaning of slavery in Jamaica, Santo Domingo, Martinique, and elsewhere, and how this understanding impinged upon ideas about liberty in the metropolis. Everywhere the glories of white freedom depended on the horrors of black bondage. And by the late 1850s, American proslavery politicians were plotting to vastly expand the domain of their “peculiar



SCENE IN THE COTTON FIELD, SOLOMON DELIVERED UP

Northup, Solomon, and Nathaniel Orr. Twelve years a slave : narrative of Solomon Northup, a citizen of New-York, kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and rescued in 1853, from a cotton plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana. Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FZ0100208072/SAS?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=f64f6a79&pg=306>.

institution,” to root it forever at the heart of free institutions, and to overthrow the regime of wage labor altogether. Slavery here became not simply an issue of ethics, property, or commerce to be debated and voted up or down; it was finally the chief weapon in a class-based political project which aimed to destroy freedom itself.

## A Social Institution

Labor-focused, politically dynamic, slavery has attracted close study and vigorous debate in recent decades, particularly as a social institution. To what degree, scholars have asked, was plantation bondage a “total institution,” shaping all aspects of black culture, personality, and social relations? At one extreme, scholars have pointed to a wealth of evidence suggesting that everything from diet and clothing to naming and kinship patterns carried on diverse African cultural patterns, and slavery saw a creative process of interweaving, improvisation, and rejuvenation, called “creolization,” which promoted the development of a strong, self-directed,

unified black community. At the other extreme, researchers insist that such cultural achievements are overstated and hollow at best. Blacks, in this view, remained slaves, regardless, and they bore the weight of the knowledge of powerlessness and victimization at every moment, communicating a legacy of damaged psyches across generations. Here, historians strain to discover an apt parallel to the slave's perilous situation: a prison? a mental institution? a concentration camp? The poles of this debate pose difficult, troubling questions for future research: the superb resources in SAS III will promote the development of a range of interpretations to carry this conversation forward. Contrast the lists of slaves grouped by family in South Carolina, drawn from the rich and rewarding James Henry Hammond Papers, with the records of Jamaica's Wakefield Plantation, located in the British Library, where the worth of human beings is tallied, in pounds, shillings, and pence, alongside that of livestock, tools, and other chattels. Consider the prescriptive articles in magazines like Virginia's *Planter's Advocate*, which urged both humane treatment and minute control of enslaved workers. And hear especially the voices of former slaves themselves, both in the autobiographies and speeches they offered once they had escaped bondage, and in the hundreds of freedpeople's memoirs collected by the US government in the 1930s. What emerges from this wealth of documents, this dread chorus of voices, is a narrative that draws together elements of both sides of the debate over slavery as a social institution. Here, truly, it may be said, the devil is in the details.

### **A Gendered Institution**

Among the chief ways in which masters sought to maximize profits and demonstrate dominance over slaves was by asserting the right to form and part black couples at will. In the early nineteenth century British Caribbean, for example, Commissioners of Compensation records show that more than 1.3 percent of the total slave population went on the auction block each year. Appalling though that statistic is—and the level was hardly outlandish at all—it can only poorly communicate the sense of uncertainty, dread, hatred, and humiliation slaves

felt in the course of everyday life. Black manhood here was denied the chief benefit all white men took for granted: the right to form lawful, independent households under their just government, and to accumulate and transfer property at will within that kin-based group. Not only were slaves universally denied the legal rights of matrimony; where slave "marriages" were recognized, their force relied entirely upon the whim and will of the slaveowner. Even here, too, it was the master who dictated the labor of black men and their wives, the discipline of slave children, the food, clothing, and shelter of black families, the marital choices and sexual choices of all under his control. Is it surprising that neighborhood whites as well as blacks looked up to a powerful planter like South Carolina's Nicholas Peay as if he were "God Almighty"? SAS III offers abundant opportunities to examine slavery and the struggle for abolition as founded in contending notions and practices of gender systems. In many instances, it may be, elite white constructions of manhood depended on the control and demasculinization of black men, and the sexual violation—actual or potential—of black women. How enslaved Africans struggled to define gender on their own terms, with what success, and at what cost, is a subject which researchers will encounter everywhere in SAS III. Particularly rich and tantalizing are the records of slave trials and petitions drawn from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Edward Dixon's Virginia store ledgers (which show the accounts of sales and purchases of goods by slaves), and the heartbreaking records of slave sales in the Rice C. Ballard Papers. In these documents, the tiny, private, minute-by-minute struggles of enslaved men and women to defend and assert their humanity gleams forth still.

### **A Racial Institution**

Historians have long debated the relationship between slavery and racism, and researchers will discover in SAS III abundant materials—from the first references to Africans in colonial America drawn from the British Records of the Colonial Office at Kew to a rich cache of legal and private documents concerning the critical U.S. court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*—with which to examine the

place of race in New World slavery. Particularly interesting in this regard are the intellectual gymnastics of public commentators seeking to define the concept of race itself, and to explain what physical, moral, and personological qualities might go into the make-up of various categories enumerated in their work. Supposedly enlightened or pseudo-scientific whites here inevitably told more about their own fears and aspirations than they did in describing the reality of the unreal thing they “studied.” For Louisiana proslavery theorist Dr. Samuel Cartwright, for example, the reason slaves persisted in running away was simple: “negroes” as a race were particularly prone to “drapetomania,” a disease whose chief symptom was a desire to light out for freedom, and whose chief cure—racial nature notwithstanding—was a sound thrashing. As this example suggests, the connection between race and New World slavery was utterly contingent. It was bound up from first to last with a larger hemispheric project of a transnational merchant-planter elite to dispossess working people throughout Western Europe, Equatorial Africa and the New World of their property and to set them to labor in conditions of unfreedom—as indentured servants, kidnapped or contracted sailors and soldiers, penniless proletarians, slaves. Red, or white, or black, Irish, or Igbo, or Iroquois ultimately made no difference to the overlords steadily creating a new, modern world of bosses and workers. All the pickings went into a same pot eventually and were stewed down into a common working-class identity. And yet, despite the essentially class-based nature of slavery as an institution, researchers will discover everywhere in SAS III how race stains, sustains, and transforms the struggle for power and identity.

### **An Ethical Institution**

Overwhelmingly, the documentary record of slavery is concerned with the making of money and its transfer, as coin, commodity, and human chattel, from hand to hand. So any scholar looking to discover what slavery meant as an institution will be confronted by stacks of ledgers and account books, business letters, bills, and legal papers galore. Money has always mattered, and so men and women have written about it fully in the past, and dreamed and argued about it even more, and left

mountains of paper about that, too. Had the monied men who built the slave regimes of the New World, and their descendents who benefitted by it and kept the system humming, or the two-legged property who suffered the brunt of their economic choices simply stuck to discussing slavery in terms of economic costs and benefits, we could know most of what there is to know about slavery, and yet almost nothing of what is important about it at all.

Among the most remarkable collections found within SAS III, for example, are the records concerning the *Zong* massacre: in 1781, the captain of the overcrowded slave ship *Zong* ordered 133 sickly Africans to be pitched overboard in the mid-Atlantic. That economic decision allowed the voyage’s investors to recover the full value of the human cargo “lost” at sea via insurance payments. The choice was heinous but unusual only in terms of the total body count; most sailors had heard stories of similar behavior. What makes the *Zong* case special is that a British private citizen, Granville Sharp, brought the incident to international attention, thwarted the slavers’ attempts to recover coin for “value” lost, and championed a drive to try the ship’s captain for murder. That case never got off the ground, but the *Zong* proved the watershed incident in launching the global antislavery movement. Thereafter, for two generations, the best that slaveholders could do was to argue that their brutal labor system conferred immense economic benefit upon themselves and their nations. Slavery was a “necessary evil,” a burden good planters bore for the sake of their families and communities.

Had the master class and its acolytes left the status of slavery as an ethical institution at that doleful assessment, how long might it have continued? True, Britain had already barred slavery from the home island in the 1770s, Revolutionary France abolished it—temporarily—a generation later, and England’s Parliament eliminated it from the British Empire in 1833. But in Brazil, Cuba, the French sugar islands, and America’s cotton kingdom, where the real money was to be made, fat wallets trumped heavy hearts. As it happened, reforms remained piecemeal and haphazard, stretching down into the 1890s and beyond.

## A Besieged Institution

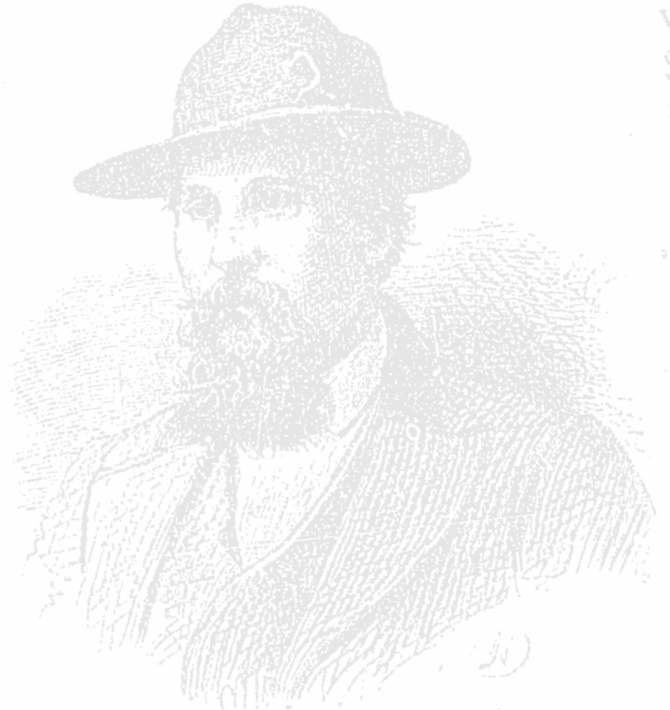
What is most astonishing, though, is that in the American South, the planter class proved unwilling simply to make their blood money and go about quietly. Instead, from the late 1830s, politicians led by the formidable John C. Calhoun trumpeted that growing abolitionist sympathies were in error, that slavery was a "positive good" to master and slave alike, and that *they*—the richest, most powerful elite in Western history—were, in fact, an oppressed minority. Across the 1840s and 1850s, they portrayed slavery as a noble, Christian institution wrongly besieged by British and northern moneygrubbers. In the luminous diaries of Virginia planter Edmund Ruffin and the political correspondence of James Hammond collected in *SAS III*, along with a wealth of collateral public documents, we discover the half-crazed, cornered mindset of the planters' vanguard as it steps irresolutely toward the brink of disunion. Beset by constant fears that the perfect paternalist relation between master and slave that they championed remained woefully imperfect, dragooned by the hypermasculine cult of honor slavery supported toward a display of manly action, frightened by the prospect of an emerging world of "mobocracy" and ruthless "wage slavery" all around them, determined to prove themselves the brave, bluff, self-sacrificing good masters they imagined themselves to be, southern slaveholders in 1861 wagered all and plunged their world into the abyss.

As *SAS Part IV* will reveal, it was now especially black men and women who seized the moment to smash their shackles, struggled to define their own place in the world in new ways, and saved freedom for the wider world so desperately imperiled for so long by slavery.

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Orleans, and that new lands and territories and profit as if by magic. But the plan possible that in future the line may extend and Texas Central railway at Denison, south



"The Pet Conductor."

their tracks and rolling stock. Besid ing across the Missouri river at Boon nificent direct line from Chicago to

As the Indian Territory boasts no two lines of rail which penetrate its disposition of our party a superb ho sleeping-room. The larder of the fireman, and brakeman took their to chase the cautious wild turkey January of 1873, rattled out of Se with this perfection of travel, this thoroughly at one's own will, with presiding genii of the train, "the and "Charlie," made the travel wilds as comfortable as the jou peror. Wherever it seemed to missed our train to a side track, a The Missouri towns in this se