

PLANTATION LABORER BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

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This is the theory of free labor. There is nothing patriarchal, nothing paternal, nothing filial in it. It is a relation of equals. It presumes a capacity of intelligence on the part of the servant equal to that of the master. This capacity, innate, though perhaps not educated and developed, really exists, for both belong to the same race. And in proportion as it is educated and developed, the dissensions and alienations between master and servant are increased. This is the inherent defect of free labor. There is no cure for it. It is seen in its most offensive form in the free States of this Continent. Of all the annoyances of life, a Yankee "help" is, perhaps, the most annoying—industrious it may be, but insolent, capricious, uncertain, levelling and unthankful. . . . It is impossible that there shall be any other agreeable and effective system of labor than the patriarchal, whether it be among similar or different races.¹

* *Author's Note:* Originally the word "plantation" meant any transplantation of people from the Old World to the New. Soon it came to distinguish one form of agricultural enterprise from another; viz., plantation from farm. The modern definition of a plantation by C. O. Brannen as a "unified agricultural organization of considerable size under one management, of practically a continuous tract of land, operated as a single unit with respect to the control of labor and products" is serviceable for any period from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. Prior to emancipation most slave property in the South was engaged as part of large-scale capitalistic enterprises in producing one or another of the three or four staple crops. Although some free laborers and some indentured servants worked on plantations, and some slaves worked elsewhere than on plantations, e.g., on medium-size farms or as mechanics, domestic servants, etc., "plantation laborer" and "slave" came to be virtually synonymous.

This article emphasizes labor in the nineteenth century, when the plantation system was most fully developed under slavery and for which documentation is most ample. Main reliance is on journals of the period that were directed largely to planters, concerned with their problems and reflecting their point of view. I acknowledge gratefully the financial aid of the Bureau of Business and Economic Research of the University of California, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the John R. Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation.

¹ *Southern Cultivator*, 19: 169 (1861).

The Virginia Company of London laid the foundation for the plantation system in British North America in 1618. In that year it began turning over to private organizers and investors—whether stockholders in the parent company or not—the tasks of getting laborers to Virginia and of putting them at work on the land. It held out the incentive of private profit by offering land in amounts proportional to the number of laborers they would transport and put to work.²

The plan found wide acceptance. Private adventurers grasped at the offer of land, some as individuals, others joined in associations. Administrators, first in Virginia and later in other colonies, found it easy and natural to deal with a few men of energy and means, willing to undertake the transplantation of many. In this way they could turn over to others a large share of the responsibility for getting out a marketable surplus above the cost of maintaining the laborers, for maintaining order in the colony, and for promoting colonization.

Thus in order to exploit the resources of the New World rapidly, one set of men was established as owners and managers of land, and another set of men was transported to perform the manual labor. The first servants of private masters arrived at Jamestown in 1619; some were white Europeans under indenture, others were black Africans purchased from a Dutch privateer. Before long, servants bound by indenture or custom, and ultimately slaves, became the main reliance for labor on colonial plantations.

For two centuries and a half laborers to serve on plantations were furnished within the twin legal frameworks of servitude and of slavery. Of these two, indentured service came to an end first. It declined late in the eighteenth century and disappeared completely in the early nineteenth. Around the close of the eighteenth century it seemed for a time that legalized slavery too

² "Instructions to George Yeardley," in Susan Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (4 vols., Washington, 1933), 3: 98-109.

might expire. Discerning southern planters and statesmen recognized elements of economic and political conflict inherent in slavery. The sheer weight of increasing economic losses indicated that many masters would not offer serious resistance to emancipation. Some even joined the attacks of moralists upon the institution. Henry Laurens, the South Carolina slave factor and planter, was among the earliest of these to record moral opposition to slavery. In 1776 he wrote his son, "I am devising means for manumitting many of them, and for cutting off the entail of slavery. Great powers oppose me—the laws and customs of my country, my own and the avarice of my countrymen. What will my children say if I deprive them of so much estate? These are difficulties, but not insuperable."³

George Washington found that he had to support too many slaves at Mount Vernon when only one third of them were any longer capable of performing field work. As a result of declining importations of young slaves from Africa and of the export of prime slaves to work new fields in the Lower South, the average age of Virginia slaves increased rapidly. Besides, a decade of low prices was making specialized tobacco planting so unattractive that Washington was unwilling to abandon mixed or general farming to resume it. In 1794 he wrote, "Were it not then, that I am principled agt. selling negros, as you would do cattle in the market, I would not, in twelve months from this date, be possessed of one, as a slave. I shall be happily mistaken, if they are not found to be a very troublesome species of property 'ere many years pass over our heads. . . ."⁴ Three years later he wrote to his nephew saying, "I wish from my soul that the legislature of this State, could see the policy of gradual abolition of slavery. It might prevent much future mischief."⁵

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1805 that ". . . inter-

³ *A South Carolina Protest Against Slavery: Being A Letter from Henry Laurens, Second President of the Continental Congress, to his Son, Colonel John Laurens; Dated Charleston, S. C., August 14th, 1776* (New York, 1861), 20. See also Henry W. Farnam, *Chapters in the History of Social Legislation in the United States to 1860* (Washington, 1938), Chapter 13, "Slavery Down to the Civil War."

⁴ "Letter to Alexander Spotswood," in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (39 vols., Washington, 1931-44), 34: 47-48.

⁵ Washington Irving, *Life of Washington*, quoted in Walter H. Mazyck, *George Washington and the Negro* (Washington, 1932), 133.

est is really going over to the side of morality. The value of the slave is every day lessening; his burden on his master daily increasing. Interest is, therefore, preparing the disposition to be just; and this will be goaded from time to time by the insurrectionary spirit of the slaves. This is easily quelled in its first efforts; but from being local it will become general, and whenever it does, it will rise more formidable after every defeat, until we shall be forced, after dreadful scenes and sufferings, to release them in their own way, which, without such sufferings we might now model after our own convenience."⁶

When Jefferson wrote that interest was "going over to the side of morality," he did not realize that already, for a full decade, strong forces had begun to push in the opposite direction. Sugar production, admirably adapted by the high overhead costs of processing to concentration in large plantations, was expanding rapidly where soil and climate were favorable. Cotton production was expanding even more, stimulated by the invention of the cotton gin. By 1804, a decade after Eli Whitney's gin was patented, cotton production had increased more than eightfold, and still more cotton was demanded. A series of inventions in England was revolutionizing manufacture of cotton textiles and the world was about to be clothed in cheap cotton cloth.

Some southern planters were torn by the conflict between economic interest and morals. Among these was John Randolph of Virginia. In his younger days he deprecated the institution, but by 1826 he was saying that he had worked himself out of his early opposition to "the subjugation of one man's will to that of another."⁷ Two years earlier, fearing abolition, he told the House of Representatives that the cry of Patrick Henry in the Convention of Virginia "still rung in his ears: 'They may liberate every one of your slaves. The Congress possess the power and will exercise it.'"⁸ When northern interests proposed in Congress to raise the tariff on wool, Randolph attacked it as a blow against the profitability of slavery, for masters would have to pay more for the clothing of their slaves. He charged that the northerners' proposal was, in fact, taking "the first step towards" emancipation, preparing "to produce such a state of things as will insure, in case the

⁶ John P. Foley, ed., *The Jeffersonian Cyclopaedia* (New York and London, 1900), Item 7932, p. 811.

⁷ *Register of Debates in Congress*, 19 Cong., 1 sess., 1825-1826 (2 vols., Washington, 1826), 2: 118.

slave shall not elope from his master—his master will run away from him.”

Randolph minimized the profitability of slavery to masters. He argued that “on a fair average” the “profits of slave labor had been, for a long time, on the decrease,” until they “scarcely reimbursed the expense of the slave, including the helpless ones, whether from infancy or age.”⁸ But even as Randolph spoke, planters were carrying the institution westward to new cotton lands and the slave population was growing rapidly as a result of natural increase and illicit importations. The “average” profit may have been low, as claimed by Randolph, but the vigor with which planters pursued profits indicates that for many they must have been high. A quarter-century later a leading proslavery journal, *De Bow's Review*, declared it was doubtless the fact “that, at the era of the revolution, many of the Southern states began to feel the burthen of unproductive slaves, and that a growing disposition to be clear of them manifested itself simultaneously with the mammon-prompted philanthropy of England. A great danger was thus springing up, when the inventions of the cotton-gin, the carding machine, the spinning-jenny, and the steam-engine, combined to weave that net-work of cotton which formed an indissoluble cord, binding the black, who was threatened to be cast off, to human progress.”⁹

Plantation agriculture had some of the economic characteristics which concentrate industry in factories. The high overhead costs of sugar mills, cotton gins, rice irrigation systems, and to a lesser extent tobacco barns, exerted an upward influence upon the size of slaveholdings per plantation, for the greater the total production, the less the proportion of the cost of mills, gins, ditches, and barns that had to be borne by each unit of the crop. Concentration of financing, marketing, and supervision of labor offered similar advantages. Once there were enough slaves to require special arrangements for supervision, such as employment of drivers and overseers, it became economical to work the maximum number of laborers these men could supervise. Fertile soil was much more favorable to plantation organization than poor soil because fertility made it possible both to concentrate heavy production within a short

distance of processing plants and to work larger gangs under the watchful eye of overseers. So, in order to attain the lowest costs per unit of product for labor, for land, for supervision, and for processing, financing, and marketing, planters were aggressive in occupying the best lands of the South.

The spur of these incentives produced rapid response. By 1790 planters already had achieved a high concentration of slaveholdings. In North Carolina 59 per cent of all slaves were held in lots of ten or more, in Maryland 65 per cent, in Virginia 72 per cent, and in South Carolina 80 per cent. The process of concentration continued right up to the eve of emancipation.¹⁰

Tobacco plantations generally operated with smaller numbers of slaves than any of the others. Gray shows from the census of 1860 that median slaveholdings in selected tobacco areas ranged from 14 in portions of Kentucky to 28 in south central Virginia. In areas of poorer soils cotton plantations used smaller gangs of slaves than were common in most tobacco areas. The median number of slaves per owner in northwestern Alabama was only 10. But where soils were better, the average slaveholding rose far above the numbers used by tobacco planters. On the alluvial lands of the Tennessee River Valley the median holding was 32 slaves, in the fertile black prairie of Alabama it was 49, and in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta it was 55. In the sea-island cotton and rice region of South Carolina the median holding rose to 70 slaves; in the sugar country of Louisiana it was 81. In particular counties producing cotton or sugar, concentration reached extremes. In Issaquena County on the Mississippi Delta, where cotton was the staple, the median slaveholding was 118, and in Rapides Parish, Louisiana, where cotton and some sugar were produced, the median stood at 125. In Ascension Parish, which specialized in sugar, the median number reached a peak of 175 slaves.¹¹

Virtually three quarters of the free population of the South were members of families with no direct ownership interest in slavery. Nevertheless, most of them, except in special areas like east Tennessee, supported a war defending the plantation labor institution which dominated their agriculture. Even among the one fourth of the

⁸ *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 18 Cong., 1 sess., 1823-1824 (2 vols., Washington, 1856), 2: 2256.

⁹ *De Bow's Review*, 10: 132 (1851); 15: 8-9 (1853); *Southern Cultivator*, 14: 203 (1856).

¹⁰ Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (2 vols., Washington, 1933), 1: 531.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 531-537.

free population with direct interest in slaveholding, ownership was concentrated in a few hands. As few as 10,993 slaveholders, or three per cent of all owners in 1860, held around one fourth of all plantation slaves. These owned an average of around 90 slaves each. A single owner in South Carolina held more than a thousand slaves. Twenty-five per cent of the owners, with 10 to 50 slaves each, owned one half of all slaves. The remaining 72 per cent of the slaveholders, who held the remaining one fourth of all slaves in groups of 9 or less, were mostly outside the plantation system.¹²

Supervision of laborers on plantations generally was in the hands of overseers. In 1850 the census reported 18,859 overseers, of whom 16,908, or nine tenths of all the overseers in the nation, were in thirteen southern states and the District of Columbia. The largest number of overseers was in Virginia, 3,747. Next came Mississippi with 2,324, Georgia with 2,166, Alabama with 1,849, South Carolina with 1,823, and Louisiana with 1,808. These six states reported 13,717 overseers or 73 per cent of the national total. Seven other southern states and the District of Columbia reported 3,191 overseers, or less than the number in Virginia alone.¹³

The larger the plantation the more likely the owner was to need an overseer. Absentee ownership was frequent and even resident planters often had overseers. The overseer usually resided on the plantation he managed, but sometimes he managed several, riding from one to another. Above him might be a manager or agent, especially if the owner was an absentee. On larger plantations the overseer was like a factory superintendent; on smaller plantations, particularly on those on which the master was resident, he was more like a boss. If the plantation was very large, there were field bosses or "drivers" under the overseer. Often these field bosses themselves were slaves, and more severe taskmasters than the overseers.

The overseer was a man of great importance to both master and slaves. He was in a class of his own above the slave and beneath the master.

¹² *Ibid.*, 481-483, 531. See also *Southern Cultivator*, Appendix, 17: 84 (1859).

¹³ U. S. Census Office, *7th Census 1850*, p. lxxiv. Possibly the concentration of overseers in the South was even greater than the census figures suggest. The term "overseer" may well have included persons bearing that designation in factories, and these were largely in the North.

He "was patronized by the benign planters and contemned by the heedless," writes Spencer Bassett. "He might belong to the same church with the planter, but he usually preferred some plain form of worship, as in the churches of Methodists or Baptists. If the two found themselves worshipping in the same place they sat apart quite distinctly. Their children did not visit one another nor intermarry. Each was a class in society and between them in social matters was a frozen ocean. . . . If he did not like this prospect, and sometimes he was in revolt against it, he might turn to the frontier which always had a welcome for a man with courage and industry."¹⁴

Of the overseer's relations with the slaves who labored under him, Bassett writes:

Slight as was the respect the overseer had from the planter it was greater than the respect he had from the slaves. To them he was the master's left hand, the burden layer and the symbol of the hardest features of bondage. From his decisions an appeal was to the owner who as a dispenser of mercy and forgiveness had some degree of affection from the slaves. . . . the slave was not proud of his overseer nor boasted of his overseer's virtues. It was the fate of this man, standing in the place of the owner, to absorb the shock of bitterness felt by the slaves for their enslavers and in so doing keep it away from those who were in reality the responsible parties.¹⁵

Overseers sprang from the small farmer class or from the landless whites, and many were indentured servants or their descendants.¹⁶ A few among them saved money and bought slaves, perhaps rented them out for hire until eventually they could become planters.

The lack of good overseers was a matter for frequent complaint. "But where are such overseers to be found?" asked the *Southern Cultivator* in 1846.

Can they be picked up at grog shops, muster fields, and political barbecues, where the young men destined to be the planter's agents are trained to a sufficient opinion of their abilities, and especially to their vast privileges as "free, independent, and equal citizens?"

¹⁴ John Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer* (Northampton, Mass., 1925), 2-3. See also *De Bow's Review*, 8: 50 (1850).

¹⁵ Bassett, *Plantation Overseer*, 3-5.

¹⁶ For an example from the eighteenth century, see Allen D. Candler, comp., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia* (26 vols., Atlanta, 1904-16), 5: 475-476.

of this republic, who are not to stoop to be any "man's man," or to do any man's business even when paid for it, unless allowed to do it after their own fashion.

The melancholy fact is that our region is nearly entirely destitute of even tolerably good overseers. And what is worse, they seem to be growing scarcer every year. . . . Young men are trained for clerkships, for superintendents in factories, as master workmen in all trades, to be junior partners in all professions. But no one is brought up to be an overseer. Very few will take that employment who can get any other.¹⁷

It was common, especially among absentee planters, to estimate the worth of overseers and to reward them mainly according to the amount of cotton produced under their supervision. In time this devotion to a single crop brought a train of evils to planter, plantation, and slave alike. Thus in 1844 the *Columbia South Carolinian* criticized both planters and overseers:

It seems scarcely credible that any man owning a plantation will so abandon it and his people on it, entirely to a hiring, no matter what his confidence in him is. Yet there are a number who do it habitually; and I have even known overseers to stipulate that their employers should not give any order, nor interfere in any way with their management of the plantation. There are also some proprietors of considerable property and pretension to being planters, who give their overseer a proportion of the crop for his wages; thus bribing him by the strongest inducements of self-interest, to overstrain and work down everything committed to his charge.¹⁸

Another writer from South Carolina took a similar view:

My idea of a "fine crop" is, first, an increase of negroes; second, enough made on the plantation, of meat, corn, etc., to feed everything abundantly; third, an improvement, rather than a deterioration, in the productive quality of the lands; fourth, the mules, horses, farming utensils and fences all in first rate order by Christmas; and then, as much cotton as can be made and gathered, under these circumstances. And I will venture to assert, that no planter will thrive, in the long run, who does not make fine crops of this sort. . . . In the vocabulary of overseers, a "fine crop" refers wholly to a fine cotton crop. They boast of nothing else at the muster-ground, and road-working, where they carry with perhaps commendable vanity, the first form, first bloom, and first grown boll. When they seek a place, they rest their claims entirely on the number of bags they have

heretofore made to the hand, and generally the employer unfortunately recognizes the justice of such claims.

No wonder, then, that the overseer desires to have entire control of the plantation. No wonder he opposes all experiments, or, if they are persisted in, neglects them; presses everything at the end of the lash; pays no attention to the sick, except to keep them in the field as long as possible, and drives them out again at the first moment, and forces sucklers and breeders to the utmost. He has no other interest than to make a big cotton crop. And if this does not please you and induce you to increase his wages, he knows men it will please, and secure him a situation with.¹⁹

These attacks on overseers, which were frequent, evoked some defenses. James Barbour, the president of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle, Virginia, undertook to discuss overseers in his annual address in 1825. He said the

treatment of our managers, or overseers . . . is one of the most difficult as well as perplexing objects, on which we have to act. From the almost universal complaints on this subject, and the continual changes that are taking place among them there must be something radically wrong in this part of our administration. I have endeavoured to explore the causes, and I will proceed to give you the result of my reflections. Undue prejudices are indulged against this class of people. That such a class is necessary to the state of society, their existence and employment unquestionably prove. A prejudice against that which is indispensable, cannot be defended on rational grounds. That there are vicious men in this class is unquestionable. But are there not vicious employers too? And it is very well worth the inquiry, whether this very prejudice, and its consequent ill treatment, is not calculated to produce the causes of complaint on whose existence this prejudice seeks to justify itself. Penurious salaries—suspicion—harsh treatment, tend to degradation, and debasement. Add to this, a continual restlessness, and a disposition to an annual change—and you have summed up the general treatment to which they are exposed. Thus you move on in one continued circle, and not unfrequently from bad to worse. We are all aware of the dilapidation of a tenement which changes hands every year. It cannot be expected, either from an overseer, or a tenant, that he will take much heed to the future, in which he does not feel himself at all interested. Indeed, it is impossible that he can succeed so well the first year. He has to learn the wishes of his employer, and the disposition of the hands under him; the capacity of the latter for labour, the different kinds of soil he has to cultivate, and a long list of details which cannot be acquired in a year. Why not try a different course? In my own case, and I draw frequently on my own

¹⁷ *Southern Cultivator*, 4: 106 (1846), 18: 287 (1860).

¹⁸ *Columbia South Carolinian*, quoted in *ibid.*, 2: 107 (1844); 4: 125 (1846).

¹⁹ *Southern Cullivator*, 2: 123 (1844).

experience, for one fact is worth a hundred theories—I give liberal wages, abundant finding, and many indulgences. I treat them kindly, and make them feel a respect for themselves. I avoid frequent change. In return I have received honesty and zeal. My principal manager has lived with me between twenty and thirty years. I cannot ascribe my success altogether to accident; fortune may, for a short time, exercise an influence; but uninterrupted success, for a long series of years, must be rooted in a deeper and more permanent cause—and instead of grudging them their wages, I rejoice to see that while they are securing my independence, they are acquiring one for themselves, due to their honesty, industry and zeal.²⁰

The *Southern Cultivator*, which often criticized overseers, and planters for not supervising the overseers, upon rare occasion undertook a practical defense of the latter. In the “great deal written” about overseers, it acknowledged “a great injustice” had been done them.

They are sometimes honest and sometimes not, like every other class of people. Any one who will acknowledge that slavery is right, is bound to acknowledge the profession of the overseer, honorable, and those who follow it for a livelihood as much entitled to respect as members of any other profession.²¹

The views of the overseers seldom were recorded. Apparently their desire for, or access to publication was not much greater than that of the laborers beneath them. Occasionally, however, an overseer protested in print. Thus in 1862 the *Southern Cultivator* published the following letter which began, sarcastically,

If there be good seasons, a favorable crop year, *the master makes* a splendid crop; if any circumstances be unpropitious and an inferior crop be made, it is the overseer. If the hands are runabouts, it is the overseer's fault; and if he flogs them to keep them at home, or locks up, or puts them in stocks, he is a brute and a tyrant. If no meat is made the overseer *would* plant too much cotton, and of course 'tis his fault. If hogs are taken good care of, the overseer is wasting corn, and “the most careless and thriftless creature alive.” If he does not “turn out” hands in time, he is lazy; if he “rousts” them out as your dad and mine had to do, and to make us do, why he is a brute.

²⁰ “Address of James Barbour,” *American Farmer*, 7: 290–291 (Dec. 2, 1825).

²¹ *Southern Cultivator*, 18: 240 (1860); 7: 140 (1849); 12: 270 (1854); 14: 338 (1856). For criticism of overseers see *ibid.*, 6: 134 (1848); 7: 41 (1849); 18: 207 (1860). For criticism of planters see *ibid.*, Appendix, 7: 23 (1849); 12: 146 (1854). See also *De Bow's Review*, 7: 383 (1849).

Thus is it from No. 1 to No. 144, all through the multiplication table. I care not in what way you examine it, it is all the same. Complaining, complaining from beginning to end. Can't you give a word of advice to planters, not to listen to negro news; and particularly not to ask for news. I admit the master is the negro's protector, and he ought to do it at all hazards. But, we are on questionable ground, and had well move circumspectly. An overseer worth a fip, will govern the negroes placed under him and if the master or mistress, picks up news or inquires for it, whether through first or second-hand, they will as certainly hear things unpleasant and cause the overseer double trouble to get negroes in a bee-line of duty. Every one conversant with negro character, knows well their proclivity for lying and stealing.

Make inquiry of them, and the owner can soon get a budget of news, sufficient to hand any overseer. A man's character is precious, even if he is an
OVERSEER.²²

As the end of the Confederacy came in sight early in 1865, a letter writer to the *Southern Cultivator* blamed the overseer along with the planter for the intensity of northern feeling against slave labor.

Our planters, as a class, need more mental discipline and self-control. It is easy to obey, but it requires a great mind to command. Those who become too soon their own masters and vested with the absolute control of a large force of servants, are in danger of having their otherwise good minds and disposition corrupted by abuse of power. I am firmly convinced that if the system of slavery had been conducted rationally, with due regard to justice and fairness, the outcry of the North against the institution, could never have found an element to live in. We are suffering from our own fault—our own miserable carelessness in the choice of suitable overseers, and our too great neglect of the moral interest and proper supervision of our slaves. . . . A plantation is a small kingdom, as absolute as Prussia, and as complicated in its details; and a just and wise administration thereof, is just as important in moral tendency and social results, though on a more limited scale. . . .²³

Organizing numerous laborers for a common productive effort, whether in factories or on plantations, raises many similar problems. In either situation management must arrive at some solution of problems of incentives, discipline, assignment of tasks, hours of labor, health and morale, extent of authority of foremen and overseers,

²² *Southern Cultivator*, 20: 136 (1862); Appendix, 7: 75 (1849). Unless otherwise noted, italics in this and subsequent quotations are in the original.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13: 84 (1865).

recruitment and labor turnover. Attention to the management of laborers is not a recent invention of industry. Planters gave it careful thought.

The views that most readily found a place in permanent records probably were those of the more enlightened planters. These show a remarkable similarity and persistence of attitude during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The usual form in which planters laid down rules of government for their property and people was in advice and instructions to their agents or overseers. These rules covered not only working hours but the entire life and conduct of the slaves so far as the planter felt he had an interest.

An example of these instructions comes from an absentee planter to his Virginia agent in 1759. It reads in portions as follows:

1st. The care of negroes is the first thing to be recommended that you give me timely notice of their wants that they may be provided with all Necessaries: The Breeding wenches more particularly you must Instruct the Overseers to be Kind and Indulgent to. . . Observe a prudent and watchful conduct over the overseers that they attend their business with diligence, keep the negroes in good order, and enforce obedience by the example of their own industry, which is a more effectual method in every respect of succeeding and making good crops than Hurry & Severity. . . .

2nd. . . . As complaints have been made by the negroes in respect to their provision of Corn, I must desire you to put that matter under such a Regulation as your own Prudence will dictate to you; The allowance to be Sure is Plentiful and they ought to have their Belly full but care must be taken with this Plenty that no waste is Committed. . . .²⁴

A couple of generations later, in 1825, James Barbour laid down his rules for managing slaves.

They form a large, if not the principal part of our labouring class. Such a class, whether bond or free, white or black, must exist in every community, as they are the indispensable foundation of the social fabric; every mitigation of their condition, consistent with the end of their existence, is therefore a solemn obligation on those to whose comfort they contribute. It has pleased Providence to permit with us a large share of this useful class to be slaves. I esteem it fortunate as

²⁴ "Instructions given by Richard Corbin, Esq., to his agent for the management of his plantation; Virginia, 1759," quoted in Ulrich B. Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier, 1649-1863*, vols. 1 and 2 of *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, John R. Commons, ed. (10 vols., Cleveland, 1910-11), 1: 109-111. See also "George Washington's letter to his overseers," quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, 1: 2 (1843).

true, that their good treatment is recommended no less by interest than humanity, and that their being subjected to a proper discipline, and made to perform a reasonable share of labour, is equally beneficial to themselves and their owners. When well treated—which I mean abundantly fed, well clothed, and in sickness due attention and every comfort their condition requires, and in the power of their owner to administer, they are enabled to perform, and do perform, in most instances with alacrity, so much more labour than when otherwise used, as most completely to indemnify their employer. And every day's observation ascertains to us, when proper authority is not exercised, that their owners are unable to provide for them comfortably—that such slaves become entirely insubordinate, and are generally a pest to the neighbourhood. And hence, permitting them to do nothing, which by some is termed humanity, is attended alike with the injury of the slave, and the speedy ruin of the owner, who surrenders himself to this misguided indulgence. Their diet should be bread without limit—a daily (if it be a small one) allowance of meat, (bacon, if practicable) milk in the summer and autumn, and cider, with those who have orchards, in the winter and spring, to supply the absence of milk. Add to this on proper occasions a small quantity of whiskey—six or seven gallons to a labouring hand during the year. The advantage is believed to be far beyond the cost. Their clothing should be three suits—a good warm one for winter, and two linen for summer, and there should be on an estate of any extent, a hand to cook and wash for the labourers. The humane attention of the master is particularly appealed to in sickness, or when they become old and infirm. In the former situation, they are entitled not only to medical aid, but to the immediate attention of the master. (I think it well worthy of communication that my principal manager keeps by him the Virginia Epicac.—vulgarly called Indian physic, which he has administered with the greatest success for upwards of twenty years, as in that time he has never lost a single adult by sickness.) He should give of his stores at that time with no sparing hand. In raising children one place of rendezvous under the superintendance of some elderly woman, who unites kindness with authority, and who is responsible for their comfort and safety, is productive of the best results. (As an evidence of which my slaves have duplicated in less than twenty-five years.) To this kind of treatment I have added rewards to the most deserving. The cost is trifling, and the effect manifestly beneficial. It inspires gratitude to the master, and becomes a stimulus to good conduct.

The relation of master and slave thus maintained, is deprived of its otherwise harsh and unfriendly character, produces the consoling reflection, that everything has been accomplished which the actual posture of our situation admits—leaves no regret, except what results from uncontrollable circumstances, and in its practical operation on the slaves themselves, is attended with

content, with comfort, and a degree of happiness far beyond what their countrymen enjoy in their native land, and challenging without fear, a comparison with the labouring classes in some of the civilized countries of Europe.²⁵

In 1832 a Georgia planter established these "rules and directions":

2. No Negro to have more than Fifty lashes inflicted for any offence, no matter how great the crime. 3. The sucking children, and all other small ones who do not work in the field, draw a half allowance of corn and salt. . . . 5. The negroes to be tasked when the work allows it. I require a reasonable days work, well done—the task to be regulated by the state of the ground and the strength of the negro. . . . 27. A Beef to be killed for the negroes in July, August and September. The hides to be tanned at home if you understand it, or put out to be tanned on shares. . . . 30. Give the negroes nails when building or repairing their houses when you think they need them. 31. My Negroes are not allowed to plant Cotton for themselves. Every thing else they may plant, and you will give them tickets to sell what they make. 32. I have no Driver. You are to task the negroes yourself, and each negro is responsible to you for his own work, and nobodys else.²⁶

During the 1840's and 1850's southern periodicals contained frequent discussions of methods for the management of plantation laborers. Thus the *Southern Cultivator*, reprinting from the *Southern Agriculturist* in 1846, gave wide circulation to the following commentary by a planter:

When I commenced planting, I was induced to believe, from the advice I received, that success depended more upon the judicious management of negroes than anything else; and that in order to arrive at any good system of management it was necessary, First, That there should be a perfect understanding between master and slave. . . . What I would mean by a perfect understanding between a master and a slave is, that the slave should know that his master is to govern absolutely, and he to obey implicitly. That he is never for a moment to exercise either his will or judgment in opposition to a positive order.

The rules I have laid down, and which are considered by all on the plantation, as fundamental rules, are:

1. No negro shall leave the plantation at any time, without my permission, or in my absence, that of the driver; the driver in that case, being responsible for the cause of such absence, which ought never to be omitted to be inquired into.

2. The driver should never leave the plantation, unless on very urgent business of the plantation.

3. No negro shall be allowed to marry out of the plantation.

4. No negro shall be allowed to sell anything without my express permission.

I have ever maintained the doctrine that my negroes have no time whatever; that they are always liable to my call without questioning for a moment the propriety of it; and I adhere to this on the grounds of expediency and right. The very security of the plantation requires that a general and uniform control over the people of it should be exercised. Who are to protect the plantation from the intrusion of ill-designing persons when everybody is abroad? Who can tell the moment when a plantation might be threatened with destruction by fire? Could the flames be arrested if the slaves are scattered throughout the neighborhood, seeking their amusement? Are these not duties of great importance, and in which every negro himself is deeply interested? To render this part of the rule justly applicable, however, it would be necessary that such a settled arrangement should exist on the plantation as to make it unnecessary for a negro to leave it, or to have a good plea for so doing. You must, therefore, make him as comfortable at home as possible, affording him what is essentially necessary for his happiness—you must provide for him yourself, and by that means create in him a habit of perfect dependence on you. Allow it once to be understood by a negro, that he is to provide for himself, and you that moment give him an undeniable claim on you for a portion of his time to make this provision; and should you from necessity, or any other cause, encroach upon his time, disappointment and discontent are seriously felt.

If I employ a laborer to perform a certain quantum of work per day, and I agree to pay him a certain amount for the performance of said work, when he has accomplished it, I of course, have no further claim on him for his time or services. But how different it is with a slave! Who can calculate the exact profit or expense of a slave one year with another? If I furnish my negro with every necessity of life, without the least care on his part—if I support him in sickness, however long it may be, and pay all his expenses, though he does nothing—if I maintain him in his old age, when he is incapable of rendering either himself or myself any service, am I not entitled to an exclusive right to his time? Good feelings, and a sense of propriety would always prevent unnecessary employment on the Sabbath, and policy would check any exaction of excessive labor in common.

Whatever other privileges I allow the driver, he is not suffered to send any negro off the plantation, unless he sends him to me, or some extraordinary circumstance arises that could make it proper that a message should be sent to a neighbor; for as his transactions are con-

²⁵ "Address of James Barbour," 290-291.

²⁶ "Instructions by Alexander Telfair, of Savannah,

Ga., to his overseer, June 11, 1832," quoted in Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier*, 1: 126-129.

fined solely to the plantation, there rarely could exist a necessity to communicate elsewhere than with me. If he sends him for his own purpose he is answerable for his absence, as the negro would be, did he go away without any permission at all.

I never give a negro a ticket to go from home without he first states particularly where he wishes to go, and assigns a cause for his desiring to be absent. If he offers a good reason, I never refuse, but otherwise, I never grant him a ticket, and feel satisfied that no practice is more prejudicial to the community, and to the negroes themselves, than that of giving them general tickets to go where they please. I am so opposed to this plan, that I never permit any negro to remain on my plantation whose ticket does not authorize him expressly to come to it. I believe there are some who think that after a negro has done his work, it is an act of oppression to confine him to the plantation, when he might be strolling about the neighborhood for his amusement and recreation. This is certainly a mistaken humanity. Habit is everything. The negro who is accustomed to remain constantly at home, is just as satisfied with the society on the plantation, as that which he could find elsewhere; and the very same restrictions laid upon him, being equally imposed on others, he does not feel them, for society is kept at home for him.

As the driver is answerable for the good conduct of the negroes, and the proper application of their time, he ought always to be present to attend; otherwise he could never with propriety be charged with neglect, in which case all responsibility would be at an end.

No rule that I have stated is of more importance than that relating to negroes marrying out of the plantation. It seems to me, from what observations I have made, it is utterly impossible to have any method, or regularity where the men and women are permitted to take wives and husbands indiscriminately off the plantation. Negroes are very much disposed to pursue a course of this kind, and without being able to assign any good reason, though the motive can be readily perceived, and is a strong one with them; but one that tends not in the least to benefit the master, or their ultimate good. The inconveniences that at once strikes one as arising out of such a practice are these:

First—in allowing the men to marry out of the plantation you give them an uncontrollable right to be frequently absent.

Secondly—Wherever their wives live, there they consider their homes, consequently they are indifferent to the interest of the plantation to which they actually belong.

Thirdly—it creates a feeling of independence, from being, of right, out of the control of their master for a time.

Fourthly—They are repeatedly exposed to temptations from meeting and associating with negroes from different directions, and with various habits and views.

Fifthly—Where there are several women on a plantation, they may have husbands from different planta-

tions belonging to different persons. These men possess different habits—are accustomed to different treatment, and have different privileges; so your plantation every day becomes the rendezvous of a medley of characters. Negroes who have the privilege of a month ticket to go where they please, and at any hour that they say they have finished their work, to leave the masters' plantations, come into yours about midday, when your negroes are at work, and the driver engaged; they either take possession of the houses in which their wives live, and go to sleep, or stroll about in perfect idleness, feeling themselves accessible to everything. What an example to those at work at the time! Can any circumstance be more subversive of good order and contentment!

Sixthly—When a man and his wife belong to different persons, they are liable to be separated from each other, as well as their children, either by the caprice of either of the parties, or where there is a sale of property. This keeps up an unsettled state of things, and gives rise to repeated new connexions. It might be asked how does this rule answer when there are several men on a plantation, and few women, or *vice versa*, where there are several women, and few men. I would observe, it would be best to equalize the number of both sexes as nearly as possible. This can be done either by purchase or sale. For to adopt rules merely because they are good in themselves, and not to pursue a plan which would make them applicable, would be fallacious.

I never allow my negroes to sell anything without my express permission. I never restrict them in any acts of industry, but reward them for their exertions, by taking from them at a fair price whatever they justly have to offer. . . . I furnish my negroes regularly with their full share of allowance weekly. I give them annually their clothes and shoes, and every third year a blanket. I supply them with salt, and from time to time throughout the year salt fish and tobacco. If a negro is suffered to sell anything he chooses without any inquiry being made, a spirit of trafficking is at once created. . . .

When a master is uniform in his own habits and conduct his slaves know his wishes, and what they are to expect if they act in opposition to, or in conformity with them. Therefore, the more order and contentment exist. A plantation might be considered as a piece of machinery; to operate successfully, all of the parts should be uniform and exact, and the impelling force regular and steady; and the master, if he pretend at all to attend to his business, should be their impelling force. . . .

Whenever the season for hoeing begins, whatever tasks a negro commences with, are considered his throughout the working of the crop. Sickness sometimes produces a little variation in this plan, but to no great extent. Where a negro knows that the task he is working on is to be worked by him the next time he goes over the field, he is induced in order to render the next working as light as possible, to work it well at first.

But where he is allowed to take his task indiscriminately as he comes into the field, there is always a great contention for tasks, each endeavoring to obtain the easiest to work. By that means great injustice and imposition arise. The fastest worker would always have the choice of tasks, and it is not always the fastest worker who is the best worker. . . .

In the different departments on the plantation as much distinction and separation are kept up as possible, with a view to create responsibility. The driver has charge of directing everything, but there are subordinate persons, who take the more immediate care of the different departments. For instance, I make one person answerable for my stock of cattle, the plantation horses, the carts, wagons, plows and their tacklings. Another has charge of my boats. A third attends the dairy, the sick, etc.; a fourth, the poultry, and providing for, and taking care of the little negroes whose parents are in the field. Each of these negroes, however, do other work.

As good a plan as any I have found, to establish security and good order on the plantation, is that of constituting a watch at night, consisting of two or more men. They are answerable for all trespasses committed during their watch. . . . The very act of organizing a watch bespeaks a care and attention on the part of the master, which has a due influence on the negro. . . .²⁷

As the end of slavery was approaching, a Mississippi Delta plantation owner set down these rules in 1857:

The health, happiness, good discipline and obedience; good, sufficient and comfortable clothing, a sufficiency of good wholesome and nutritious food for both man and beast being indispensably necessary to successful planting, as well as for reasonable dividends for the amount of capital invested, without saying anything about the Master's duty to his dependants, to himself and his God—I do hereby establish the following rules and regulations for the management of my Prairie Plantation, and require an observance of the same by any and all Overseers I may at any time have in charge thereof to wit:—

Punishment must never be cruel or abusive, for it is absolutely mean and unmanly to whip a negro from mere passion or malice, and any man who can do this is entirely unworthy and unfit to have control of either man or beast.

My negroes are permitted to come to me with their

²⁷ Extract from *Southern Agriculturist*, quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, Appendix, 4: 43 (1846); 5: 61 (1847); Appendix, 7: 103 (1849); Appendix, 8: 163–164 (1850); Appendix, 9: 87 (1851); 10: 88, 227 (1852); Appendix, 11: 226, 301 (1853); *De Bow's Review* 11: 369 (1851); *Alabama Planter*, quoted in *ibid.*, 13: 193 (1852).

complaints and grievances and in no instance shall they be punished for so doing. On examination, should I find they have been cruelly treated, it shall be considered a good and sufficient cause for the immediate discharge of the Overseer.

Prove and show by your conduct toward the negroes that you feel a kind and considerate regard for them. Never cruelly punish or overwork them, never require them to do what they cannot reasonably accomplish or otherwise abuse them, but seek to render their situation as comfortable and contented as possible.

See that their necessities are supplied, that their food and clothing be good and sufficient, their houses comfortable; and be kind and attentive to them in sickness and old age. . . .

See that they keep themselves well cleaned: at least once a week (especially during summer) inspect their houses and see that they have been swept clean, examine their bedding and see that they are occasionally well aired; their clothes mended and everything attended to that conduces to their health, comfort and happiness. . . .

Christianity, humanity and order elevate all—injure none—whilst infidelity, selfishness and disorder curse some—delude others and degrade all. . . .

All hands should be required to retire to rest and sleep at a suitable hour and permitted to remain there until such time as it will be necessary to get out in time to reach their work by the time they can see well how to work—particularly so when the nights are short and the mornings very cold and inclement.

Allow such as may desire it a suitable piece of ground to raise potatoes, tobacco. They may raise chickens also with privileges of marketing the same at suitable leisure times.

There being a sufficient number of negroes on the plantation for society among themselves, they are not to be allowed to go off the plantation merely to seek society, nor on business without a permit from myself or the Overseer in charge—nor are other negroes allowed to visit the plantation. . . .

I would that every human being have the gospel preached to them in its original purity and simplicity; it therefore devolves upon me to have these dependants properly instructed in all that pertains to the salvation of their souls; to this end whenever the services of a suitable person can be secured, have them instructed in these things—in view of the fanaticism of the age [i.e., abolition sentiment] it behooves the Master or Overseer to be present on all such occasions. They should be instructed on Sundays in the day time if practicable, if not then on Sunday night.²⁸

²⁸ "Instructions by J. W. Fowler of Coahoma County, Miss.," quoted in Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier*, 1: 112–115. See also *De Bow's Review*, 25: 463 (1858); *Southern Cultivator*, 15: 303 (1857); Appendix, 17: 169 (1859); 18: 276, 305, 325. A letter to the *Southern Cultivator*.

The management of slave laborers, in the planters' view, was not merely a means of getting work done for themselves. By controlling slaves they were also performing a semi-public service, relieving the rest of society of the task of controlling a particularly unruly group of people. An item in *De Bow's Review* in 1857 stated:

Slavery is nothing more than a rule of society—nothing more than a civil rule restraining the natural liberties of slaves 'so far,' in the words of Blackstone, 'as is necessary and expedient for the general advantage.' Slavery thus reposes upon the very same basis that the General Government of the United States does, and that is, upon the necessity of guarding by constitutional or legal provisions or restrictions against the undue indulgence of unreasonable and immoral men, when left to no other restraint than natural liberties urged on by wicked propensities. . . .²⁹

Patrols organized by planters were among the instruments for performing this police function. In 1853 *De Bow's Review* printed this rule of "one of the wealthiest and most intelligent planters of the Old Dominion":

Each manager will do well to organize in his neighborhood, whenever practicable, patrol parties, in order to detect and punish irregularities of the negroes, which are generally committed at night. But lest any patrol party visit his plantation without apprising him of their intention, he will order the negroes to report to him every such visit, and he will promptly, upon receiving such report, join the patrol party, and see that they strictly conform to the law whilst on his plantation, and abstain from committing any abuse.³⁰

Even the planters' police patrols, it appears, would bear watching by those they were supposed to protect.

Planters were responsible for the subsistence of their slaves. Whether slaves should be allowed gardens with opportunity to make small sales for cash as an incentive to achieve a better sub-

vator in 1860 provides the following commentary on contemporary discipline of soldiers, as well as slave laborers. "Every gang of negroes requires some little difference in management; but as a general thing, the Army Regulations as to the disciplines in Forts is the best mode of managing negroes I know of." 18: 305 (1860).

²⁹ *De Bow's Review*, 22: 75 (1857); see also 19: 40 (1855); *Southern Cultivator*, 9: 86 (1851); *Montgomery Mail* quoted in *ibid.*, 14: 192 (1856).

³⁰ *De Bow's Review*, 14: 176 (1853); see also *Southern Cultivator*, 19: 313 (1861).

sistence than afforded by plantation rations, was a matter on which masters differed. Some approved; others disapproved. One wrote in *De Bow's Review* in 1851:

I do not permit them to have 'truck patches' other than their gardens, or to raise anything whatever for market; but in lieu thereof, I give to each head of a family and to every single negro on Christmas day, five dollars, and send them to the county town under the charge of the overseer or driver, to spend their money. In this way, I save my mules from being killed up in the summer, and my oxen in winter, by working and hauling off their crops; and more than all, the negroes are prevented from acquiring habits of trading in farm produce, which invariably leads to stealing, followed by whipping, trouble to the master, and discontent on the part of the slave.³¹

Labor was supervised in gangs on most plantations. On rice plantations individual tasks to be performed separately were assigned; even with gang labor, tasks were commonly set in the manner of piece rates. "A task is as much work as the meanest full hand can do in nine hours, working industriously," was the rule on a rice plantation in South Carolina in 1856.

The Driver is each morning to point out to each hand their task, and this task is never to be increased, and no work is to be done over task except under the most urgent necessity; which over-work is to be reported to the Proprietor, who will pay for it. No negro is to be put into a task which they cannot finish with tolerable ease. It is a bad plan to punish for not finishing task; it is subversive of discipline to leave tasks unfinished, and contrary to justice to punish for what cannot be done. In nothing does a good manager so much excel a bad, as in being able to discern what a hand is capable of doing, and in never attempting to make him do more.

No negro is to leave his task until the driver has examined and approved it, he is then to be permitted immediately to go home; and the hands are to be encouraged to finish their tasks as early as possible, so as to have time for working for themselves.³²

The rules that planters established and their admonitions to overseers are reliable evidence that the master's pecuniary interest in his property, and his humanity, did afford some substantial

³¹ *De Bow's Review*, 10: 624 (1851); *Alabama Planter*, quoted in *ibid.*, 17: 424 (1854); *Southern Cultivator*, 11: 227 (1853).

³² "Rules on the Rice Estate of P. C. Weston, South Carolina, 1856," *De Bow's Review*, 22: 38-44 (1857).

protections to plantation laborers. Planters relied heavily on this fact when meeting their opponents. They repeated again and again that the interest of planter and slave coincided, since the latter was property of the former. John Randolph argued that raising the price of slaves' blankets was raising it to the slave. A tariff on wool, he said, would "enhance to the poor slave (or, what was the same thing, to his master) the price of his annual blanket, and of his sordid suit of coarse, but to him comfortable woolen cloth. . . ." ³³

In 1851, *De Bow's Review* declared that

The most efficient, and, of course, the most profitable laborers, are those who are the most active, healthy, happy and contented. To be active, healthy, happy and contented, there is a higher law, which says, their griefs shall be inquired into, their troubles removed, and they shall be well fed, lodged and clothed. Interested motives, if nothing else, would force the master, whose slaves are profitable to him, to protect them from what are called the abuses of slavery, and to bestow on them every comfort and attention that the most tender humanity would give. Everything which enhances the value of the slave improves his condition; as it brings the self-interest of the master the more strongly to bear in protecting him against abuses, and in adding to his comforts. ³⁴

The motive of interest was ever present, the more so as the price of Negroes went up. A cynical letter published in the *Southern Cultivator* said,

The time has been, throwing humanity aside, that the farmer could kill up and wear out one Negro to buy another; but it is not so now. Negroes are too high in proportion to the price of cotton, and it behooves those who own them to make them last as long as possible. ³⁵

This assurance that the economic interest of the planter was the guardian of the laborer extended beyond protection from excessive punishment, and beyond provision during sickness, infancy, and old age, to include protection against accidents. The advantage of being a slave instead of a free laborer became the subject of stories. Thus, the *Southern Cultivator* in 1859 told the story of the slave who refused to climb up a tree to trim branches, saying that if he fell the planter would lose a thousand dollars. Hire an Irishman, the Negro suggested and "if he falls and kills himself, dar won't be no loss to nobody." ³⁶

³³ *Annals of Congress*, 18 Cong., 1 sess., 2: 2256.

³⁴ *De Bow's Review*, 11: 188 (1851).

³⁵ *Southern Cultivator*, 7: 69 (1849).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17: 46 (1859).

In 1846 a committee reported to a southern county agricultural society on the "Management of slaves."

Of all the motives which influence the intercourse between men, *interest* is certainly the strongest—this the employer of the hireling lacks to a great extent to induce him to treat his hireling kindly. The interest of the master in connection with the hireling, is to obtain as much labor from him as possible at the smallest cost; and when he becomes too old . . . to get rid of him . . . whilst with the owner of the slave, as the slave is his property, and he is bound for his support under all circumstances, we can readily conceive how strongly the motive of the master in taking good care of the slave, and thus extending his time of usefulness.

This committee went on to acknowledge and deplore that the same community of interest between master and slave did not exist between overseer and slave.

There is one class of our community to whom all the motives referred to, to induce us to kindness to our slaves, do not apply. Your Committee refer to our overseers. As they have no property in our slaves, of course they lack the check of self-interest. As their only aim in general is the mere crop results of the year, we can readily conceive the strong inducement they have to over-work our slaves, and here masters are often much to blame, for inadvertently encouraging this feeling in their overseers. ³⁷

In 1850 Jefferson Davis touched on these aspects when speaking before the United States Senate:

Wherever there is an immediate connection between the master and slave, whatever there is of harshness in the system is diminished. Then it preserves the domestic character, and strictly patriarchal relation. It is only when the slaves are assembled in large numbers, on plantations, and are removed from the interested, the kind, the affectionate care of the master, that it ever can partake of that cruelty which is made the great charge against it by those who know nothing of it, and which, I will passingly say, probably exists to a smaller extent than in any other relation of labor to capital. ³⁸

On their own plantations Senator Davis and his brother vested discipline entirely in a system of slave courts and slave constables, save for the masters' power of pardon. ³⁹ The Senator's words,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4: 113 (1846).

³⁸ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 sess., 1849–1850 (Washington, 1850), 22, pt. 1, p. 150.

³⁹ W. L. Fleming, "Jefferson Davis, the Negroes and the Negro Problem," *Sewanee Review* (October, 1908),

though neither insincere nor idle, minimized the number of absentee planters and their use of overseers and the fact that in 1850, one half of all slaves were held in parcels of 20 or more, and about one fifth in parcels of 50 or more.⁴⁰

All criminal laws were severe in the colonial period, and the slave codes partook liberally of the harshness of the times.⁴¹ Besides, the dangers of slave insurrection were greater in the earlier period when unsubdued African primitives annually were swelling the labor supply. By the nineteenth century moderating influences had been effective. Closing the slave trade in 1808 raised the ever-growing proportion of slaves who had acquired their status by birth rather than by capture. This fact, together with the general moderation of legal punishment of all offenders in society, combined to moderate the emphasis on physical punishment during the last half century of slavery.⁴²

Since the master's property interest in his slaves failed to provide as complete protection against abuses as was claimed, or deemed desirable, some legal protections were written gradually into the slave codes. Naturally it was for the courts to interpret them. The slave was given his day in court, but the masters still held the upper hand in the administration of justice. In 1850 *De Bow's Review* carried this commentary upon the meaning of a portion of a slave code in the instructions of a southern judge to a jury:

The terms, "shall *unlawfully* whip or beat any slave not under his charge," "without reasonable provocation," seem to me convertible. For, if the beating be either without provocation, or is so enormous that the provocation can be no excuse, then it is unlawful. What is sufficient provocation, by word or deed, is a question for the jury. The question is, whether, as slave owners and reasonable men, if they had been in the place of the defendant, they would have inflicted the whipping or beating which the defendant did? If they answer this question in the affirmative, then the defendant must be acquitted—otherwise convicted.⁴³

quoted in Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York and London, 1918), 296.

⁴⁰ Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 1: 530.

⁴¹ *De Bow's Review*, 25: 296 (1858). On slave codes, see Farnam, *Chapters in the History of Social Legislation*, Chapter 14, "Southern Legislation Regarding Slavery."

⁴² *De Bow's Review*, 1: 411 (1846).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8: 70 (1850); *Southern Cultivator*, 17: 31 (1859).

Punishment was regarded simply as one manifestation of a system of coercion to obtain necessary labor. Planters did not question the necessity either of getting the work done or of coercing the Negro to accomplish it. As a southern governor said in 1850,

Can you conceive that anything short of the power of the master over the slave, could confine the African race, notoriously idle and improvident, to labor on our plantations? Break this bond, but for a day, and these plantations will be solitudes.⁴⁴

Once granted the propriety of whatever coercion was necessary for control and the accomplishment of work, further discussion was reduced to mere details of method. This, in fact, was the setting in which the planters aired their differences of opinion over discipline.

In the decades just preceding emancipation this question—what were suitable means of punishing slaves?—was discussed frequently and brought differing answers. Some favored strictness with physical force to back it up; others favored primary reliance on moral coercion. The following admonition, set down in 1855 in *De Bow's Review*, illustrates the deliberate temper in which discussions over punishment took place:

It is indispensable that you exercise judgment and consideration in the management of the negroes under your charge. Be *firm*, and at the same time *gentle* in your control. Never display yourself before them in a passion; and even if inflicting the severest punishment, do so in a mild, cool manner, and it will produce a tenfold effect. When you find it necessary to use the whip—and desirable as it would be to dispense with it entirely, it is necessary at times—apply it slowly and deliberately, and to the extent you are determined in your own mind to be needful before you begin. The indiscriminate, constant and excessive use of the whip is altogether unnecessary and inexcusable. When it can be done without a too great loss of time, the stocks offer a means of punishment greatly to be preferred; so secured in a lonely, quiet place, where no communication can be held with anyone, nothing but bread and water allowed, and the confinement extending from Saturday, when they drop work, until Sabbath evening, will prove much more effectual in preventing a repetition of the offence than any amount of whipping. Never threaten a negro, but if you have occasion to punish do it at once, or say nothing until you are ready to do so. A violent and passionate threat will often

⁴⁴ *De Bow's Review*, 8: 131 (1850); 3: 193 ff. (1847). See also "Our Dangers," *Southern Cultivator*, 23: 90 (1865).

scare the best disposed negro to the woods. Always keep your word with them, in punishments as well as in rewards. If you have named the penalty for any certain offence, inflict it without listening to a word of excuse. Never forgive that in one that you would punish in another, but treat all alike, showing no favoritism. By pursuing such a course, you convince them that you act from principle and not from impulse, and you will certainly enforce your rules. Whenever an opportunity is afforded you for rewarding continued good behavior, do not let it pass; occasional rewards have a much better effect than frequent punishments.

Never be induced by a course of good behavior on the part of negroes to relax the strictness of your discipline; but, when you have by judicious management brought them to that state, keep them so by the same means. By taking frequent strolls about the premises, including of course the quarter and stock yards, during the evening and at least twice a week during the night, you will put a more effectual stop to any irregularities than by the most severe punishments. The only way to keep a negro honest is not to trust him. This seems a harsh assertion, but it is unfortunately too true.⁴⁵

References to use of the whip as a means of coercion were infrequent in southern agricultural journals. Usually these were by way of a caution to moderation. "Negroes are not slaves unless kept in subjection," said the *Southern Cultivator* in 1860, "and if slavery is right, it is also right to use means to keep up subjection, and my opinion is, the lash—not used murderously, as would-be philanthropists assert, is most effectual."⁴⁶ A letter published by the *Southern Cultivator* in 1849 is perhaps the most literal treatment of physical force carried in its files.

The overseer's whip is a barbarous instrument and its use should be abolished—but a slight stroke with one will lacerate the skin and cause a scar that the negro will carry to his grave. To say nothing of the inhumanity of the thing, the value of the negro is impaired, for purchasers generally regard a negro's back as an index to his character. Severe punishment is often necessary on a well-conducted plantation, and, as a substitute for the whip, a leather strap may be used, eighteen inches long, and two and a half broad, fastened with tacks to a wooden handle a foot in length.⁴⁷

The growth of abolition sentiment in the North stirred southern planters to self-examination and defense of their system of plantation labor. Under-

⁴⁵ *De Bow's Review*, 18: 344 (1855); 22: 376 (1857); *Southern Cultivator*, 18: 176, 258 (1860).

⁴⁶ *Southern Cultivator*, 18: 240 (1860).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7: 135 (1849).

neath all the varied forms their defenses assumed was the simple thesis that the white planter must exercise undisputed control over Negro laborers. James Barbour told the Albermarle Agricultural Society that

Any effort forcibly to disturb their relation with a view to a change of their condition, which can be attempted only by those who do not foresee, or seeing, are reckless of the consequences, cannot fail to make worse the condition of the slaves. For our own daily experience teaches us, that the condition of the slaves, when well treated, is infinitely preferable to that of free people of colour. We know that they are ignorant, indolent, and demoralized, having no ostensible means of acquiring their subsistence, wretched as it is, so as to leave no doubt that it is derived from prostitution, from theft, and from begging, and to be rid of whom is an object of our first desire. Our slaves, brought amongst us by other generations, not only under the sanction of, but by the existing sovereign authority—mixed with us in such numbers as to be unmanageable, except in their present condition; guaranteed as property to us by the fundamental principles of society, both implied and expressed, they are, and of necessity must so continue under our control; and such, I believe, is the settled conviction of a vast proportion of the American people, to whatever section we refer. The croakings of the dis-tempered, who seek to establish a character for philanthropy at the expense of others; whose speculations are indulged without scruple, at the hazard of the future peace and happiness of a great nation; who encounter neither risk nor sacrifice in the projects they propose, will soon be consigned to the oblivion they merit.⁴⁸

Coercion is necessary to evoke labor, ran another of these defenses, and so, to advance civilization. *De Bow's Review* reprinted in 1850 a memoir by Chancellor Harper, which stated,

The coercion of slavery alone is adequate to form man to habits of labor. Without it there can be no accumulation of property, no providence for the future, no taste for comforts or elegancies, which are the characteristics and essentials of civilization. He who has obtained the command of another's labor, first begins to accumulate and provide for the future, and the foundations of civilization are laid. We find confirmed by experience that which is so evident in theory.⁴⁹

The Chancellor was very definite that it is command over the labor of others which is necessary to the advancement of civilization.

⁴⁸ "Address of James Barbour," 290–291.

⁴⁹ *De Bow's Review*, 8: 234 (1850); see also 9: 495 (1850); 20: 13 (1856); *Augusta Chronicle & Sentinel*, quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, 15: 87 (1857).

Having the command of abundance of land, no one will submit to be employed in the service of his neighbor. No one, therefore, can employ more capital than he can use with his own hands, or those of his family, nor have an income much beyond the necessities of life. There can, therefore, be little leisure for intellectual pursuits, or means of acquiring the comforts or elegancies of life. It is hardly necessary to say, however, that if a man has the command of slaves, he may combine labor and use capital to any required extent, and therefore accumulate wealth.⁵⁰

This defense was a direct challenge to the intense assertion by northern farmers that a life of culture was within the reach of a working farmer.

When thinking of the need for defending slavery against abolitionists rather than counseling overseers how to rule plantation laborers, southern spokesmen played down their emphasis on physical force in discipline even more than usual and talked of the force of will-power. Dr. Cartwright said:

It is not the whip, as many suppose, which calls forth those muscular exertions, the result of which is sugar, cotton, breadstuffs, rice, and tobacco. These are products of the white man's will, acting through the muscles of the prognathous race in our Southern States. If that will were withdrawn, and the plantation handed over as a gracious gift to the laborers, agricultural labor would cease for the want of that spiritual power called the will, to move those machines—the muscles. They would cease to move here, as they have in Hayti.⁵¹

Defenses against criticism were not always consistent with each other. Some defenders emphasized that discipline of slave laborers rested on will-power. Others admitted that it rested on force, and blamed the abolitionists. Thus in 1849 Governor James H. Hammond declared:

In the face of discussions which aim at loosening all ties between master and slave, we have in some measure to abandon our efforts to attach them to us and control them through their affections and pride. We have to rely more and more on the power of fear. We must in all our intercourse with them assert and maintain strict mastery, and impress it on them that they are slaves. This is painful to us, and certainly no present advantage to them. But it is the direct consequence of the abolition agitation. We are determined to continue masters, and to do so we have to draw the rein

tighter and tighter day by day to be assured that we hold them in complete check.⁵²

The defenders of slavery usually conceded that force was at the bottom of work discipline under slavery, but they pointed out that force is not peculiar to slavery. The force of economic insecurity, they said, coerced men to perform labor just as the discipline of slavery coerced the slaves. The committee which reported to a southern county agricultural society in 1846 said:

From the attachment which exists between the master and slave, your Committee are of opinion that an appeal to their better feelings would be sufficient in most cases to control them. They are aware, however, that this rule must have a limit, and that the law of force must have some share in the government of the negro as well as the white man. In those countries where what is called *voluntary* servitude exists, the force then is necessity. When the laborer is dependent upon his daily income for the support of himself and family; and when the loss of his wages, as is often the case, involves the starvation of his wife and children, certainly no greater force can be applied to him than the threat of turning him off to seek his bread, without a character, or probably with a blackened one.

To clinch this argument of "you, too" directed at northern employers, the committee pointed out that the slaveholder was prohibited from exerting the same kind of economic force which sufficed for "government" of white men. "In the management of our slaves, this cannot be," continued the committee, "as the master is bound for their support."⁵³

This economic security—as an advantage of the slave which the free laborer did not possess—received much emphasis. Indeed, Governor Hammond pressed the argument so far as to depict the planter, to his own economic disadvantage, as relieving the community. Thus the taxpayers, along with the slaves, appeared as principal beneficiaries.

While I thus freely admit, that, to the individual proprietor, slave labor is dearer than free, I do not mean to admit it as equally clear, that it is dearer to the community and to the State. Though it is certain that the slave is a far greater consumer than your laborer, the year round, yet your pauper system is costly and wasteful. Supported by your community at large, it is not

⁵⁰ *De Bow's Review*, 8: 339 (1850).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25: 48 (1858). See also "Free Nigger," *Cornfield Press*, quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, 23: 29 (1865).

⁵² *De Bow's Review*, 7: 498 (1849); see also *Southern Cultivator*, 18: 130-131 (1860); 19: 164 (1861).

⁵³ *Southern Cultivator*, 4: 113-114 (1846); see also 17: 132 (1859).

administered by your hired agents with that interested care and economy—not to speak of humanity—which mark the management of ours, by each proprietor of his own non-effectives; and is both more expensive to those who pay, and less beneficial to those who receive, its bounties.⁵⁴

As for the slave laborer, he might not know freedom or ease, but he would never be left to starve. On February 19, 1850, Senator Solomon W. Downs of Louisiana told the United States Senate:

Sir, I call upon the opponents of this system . . . to prove that even the white laboring classes in the North—I say nothing of the blacks there—are as happy, or as contented, or as comfortably situated, as the blacks in the South. Sir, the slaves in the South do not suffer one-tenth part of the evils that the white laborers do in the North. Poverty is unknown to the southern slave; for as soon as the master of slaves becomes too poor to provide for them, he sells them to others who can take care of them. This, sir, is one of the excellencies of the system of slavery, that the slave never experiences the pinching wants of poverty. Sir, one may travel through the northern States and see thousands of the poor and destitute almost without the commonest necessities of life; but, sir, I defy any man to travel through the broad area of the fifteen southern States and find a single poor slave. There never was one, and there never will be one, as long as the institution of slavery exists.⁵⁵

Senator Downs' answer to the attack on slavery, in other words, was to take the offensive by trying to strip the northern industrial laborer of the halo that freedom was supposed to adorn him with.

Defenders of plantation labor gave as direct an answer to farmer-employers as to industrial employers. They compared the conditions of slaves of planters and free wage laborers employed by farmers, to the advantage of the former. An article in the *Southern Cultivator* in 1858 declared:

The planter is a paternal guide for all his people, the farmer is a daily or monthly task-master, who takes vital powers to the tune of so many dollars and cents for months and days of toil, as the case may be. One is a position of kindly care, based on the mutual dependence of interest and human sympathy; the other is

the rigid rule of labor-paying exaction, which terminates when the time of service has expired.⁵⁶

It was even asserted that slavery produced happiness among plantation laborers. The county agricultural committee quoted earlier painted a picture to match the contemporary idyllic descriptions of labor on a northern freehold farm.

Your committee are well persuaded that the condition of our slaves will bear a favorable contrast with that of any other laboring population in the civilized world, as far as comfort and happiness is concerned. . . . Your committee do not by any means contend, that all the picture of slavery is one of light, (and this they would correct). But they do insist that, in comparison with other forms of servitude, it will bear a favorable contrast—in fact, they challenge the world to produce a laboring population more happy, better fed, or cared for, than our slaves. . . . No more beautiful picture of human society can be drawn than a well organized plantation, thus governed by the humane principles of reason. When the negroes are well fed, well clothed and have not unreasonable burthens imposed on them, but are accustomed to a systematic and regular course of labor, especially if the slaves have been born and reared up in the master's household, or have long been members of his family, and hence have that strong attachment which never fails to grow up between the master and his slave in the course of time. The picture never fails to remind one of the patriarchal days when *Abraham had slaves born in his house or purchased with his money*. Under such a state of things the master knows the man; the man, his master. The master feels confident that the man is attached to him, and will consult his interest. The man feels confident that the master will only require what is right of him, and will abundantly provide for all his wants as well as that of his family. When he or his children are sick, he knows that he will have his master's physician to minister to them. When he is naked, he knows he will be clothed; and when he is old, he knows that his wants will all be supplied to him in his small cottage; during the winter he will be warmed by his master's fire, and clothed from his master's flock; and at all times he knows that he will be fed from his master's crib and meat house. The man looks even beyond death, and knows that when he shall have died, he will be decently buried, and his children after him provided for. When sickness and affliction happen to such a master, how anxious the solicitude of his slaves for his recovery? And when at last death overtakes the good master, the tears, the sobs and the cries of his faithful slaves point to him rather as their father than their master. This is no fancy sketch—it is a picture, the original of which we have often admired—and we venture that no more beautiful

⁵⁶ *Florida Home Companion*, quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, 16: 368 (1858).

⁵⁴ *De Bow's Review*, 7: 495 (1849).

⁵⁵ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 sess., 175. See also "Equality of the Races—Negro Mania," *De Bow's Review*, 11: 630 (1851); 12: 507 (1852); "The Hireling and the Slave," *ibid.*, 18: 185, 461 (1855); 19: 208 ff. (1855); also 18: 688; 19: 44; "Centralization and Socialism," *ibid.*, 20: 692 (1856).

sight has ever been viewed in the countries of voluntary servitude, however great the boast of its superiority as a system of labor over slavery. Your Committee are aware that there are those who doubt the probability of a strong attachment between the master and the slave. But they are satisfied that this position is wrong, and from their experience they *know* that there are numerous cases in the Southern States where the picture drawn above is faithful as a sketch of actual life.⁵⁷

The theme that the slaves were happy recurs again and again. "I believe our slaves are the happiest three millions of human beings on whom the sun shines," said Governor Hammond.⁵⁸ In a mellow mood the editor of the *Farmer's Monthly Visitor* drew this picture of an Alabama plantation in 1845:

A more happy set of laborers can hardly be conceived than the slaves upon the plantation of Col. Wood. The daily task of those engaged in the outdoor work is easy; and they have much time every week which they call their own, with opportunities to cultivate their little garden plot, to raise and feed poultry, with other extra privileges. They are all well fed and clothed in the abundance which the plantation produces, with little of the concern which poor people of other countries experience. Upon the faces of the colored people which we saw about the premises health and contentment were depicted: the women chanted with their voices of song and music correspondent to the movements of carding and the buzz of the spinning wheel.⁵⁹

Descriptions of this sort were plausible, and even northerners unfavorable to slavery on principle found it difficult to resist them, especially when they came South. A North Carolina correspondent of the *New England Farmer* was disturbed when he saw a northerner come South to dispose of slaves he had inherited, and remain to operate the plantation as before. In 1856 he wrote:

Mr. B. inherited his plantation about seventeen years ago, together with some hundred negroes, he, at that time, living at the North, although of Southern birth, and at that time decided anti-slavery tendency. His first business after taking possession of his property was to investigate how he could best dispose of his slaves for their own advantage . . . whilst engaged in this liberation scheme, together with his brother, he imported a hundred Irishmen, so as to try white labor,

⁵⁷ *Southern Cultivator*, 4: 113-114 (1846). See also "Slavery As It Is," *New York Herald*, quoted in *ibid.*, 13: 212 (1855).

⁵⁸ *De Bow's Review*, 8: 123 (1850).

⁵⁹ *Southern Cultivator*, 3: 148 (1845).

which proved an entire failure, costing them about \$2,000. . . His working force is one hundred and seventy-five negroes. . . The only danger to be apprehended is, that such men coming here would become slave owners; for the institution as seen here presents no obnoxious features, and provides *so well for the animal happiness of the slave*, that it necessitates one to continually summon up his principle to resist falling in with and heartily approving the whole system. . . ⁶⁰

While defenders of the plantation system often spoke sincerely of the advantages and happiness of the laborers within it, at other times they revealed uneasiness that the slaves might not share the same opinion. The editor of the *American Farmer*, for example, pointed out the dangers to planters of permitting contact between slave and free Negroes:

We start with the proposition, startling as we are aware it may prove to some, that measures ought to be taken, prospectively, to *remove and exclude all free negroes from every state where slavery exists*. The two conditions of existence, the one being slaves and the others only half free, are incompatible with the welfare as well of the one as of the other. There is not, nor will there be any security or happiness for the slaves while free negroes live in daily communion with them—A total separation of the two and the banishment of the free blacks beyond the confines of the state, is the only thing that can give any thing like security to the master, and contentment to the servant. The intermixture of the two is deleterious in every way in which it can be examined, without being attended with one solitary advantage to either. The presence of the free, living in indolence and going where he listeth, even though it be, as it often is, in rags and squalid misery, excites the envy of the slave—he becomes impatient of all labour, and instead of being as he would, contented with a lot that combines more of the comforts, and less of the cares of life than that which is allotted to *any other class of human beings* in existence on the face of the earth, his mind is ever on the rack to devise the means of escape from all restraint. True, he sees in the abject condition, the complicated diseases, the criminal lives and premature death of the free negroes of the cities, enough to deter him from desiring a change from a condition of careless abundance to one of precarious and miserable subsistence; yet hope flatters him that he will be an exception to the almost invariable lot of the free negro, and he never rests until, by his aid, as a medium of communication and concert, with the abolitionist of the North, he succeeds at last in absconding; to become the hated rival or worse than slave of his seducer, or, more happily for him, to be arrested and sold to the South.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *New England Farmer*, 8: 173 (1856).

⁶¹ *American Farmer*, 1: 107 (August 28, 1839).

The seventeenth century argument that slavery had brought Negroes the blessings of Christian religion was carried forward through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. In 1858 the *Southern Cultivator* published Parson Brownlow's declaration that slavery

has brought five times the number of negroes into the church than all the missionary operations of the world combined. Slavery has tamed, civilized, christianized, if you please, the brutal negroes brought to this country by New England kidnappers; it has elevated them, physically, morally and mentally—and therefore it has proven a blessing to the negro race.⁶²

The planters' duty, and the good of the Negroes themselves led to the same conclusion. An Alabama speaker in 1851 explained:

In dealing with this question it will not do to be guided by abstract notions of liberty and slavery. We can only judge the future by the past; and as experience proves that the negro is better off in slavery at the South, than in freedom elsewhere, it is the part of philanthropy to keep him here, as we keep our children in subjection for their own good.⁶³

Planters believed that slave labor was a "peculiar institution," peculiarly adapted to Negroes in the southern states. Consequently it was not subject to the usual generalizations about relations between human beings. This belief offered opportunity for many a convenient explanation. The troublesome issue of physical punishment was handled in that way. Physical punishment, everyone admitted, would degrade freemen, but, so ran the defense, it does not degrade slaves. Chancellor Harper said:

It is true that the slave is driven to labor by stripes; and if the object of punishment be to produce obedience or reformation, with the least permanent injury, it is the best method of punishment. But is it not intolerable that a being formed in the image of his Maker, should be degraded by blows? This is one of the perversions of mind and feeling, to which I shall have occasion again to refer. Such punishment would be degrading to a freeman, who had the thoughts and aspirations of a freeman. In general it is not degrading to a slave, nor is it felt to be so. The evil is the bodily pain. Is it degrading to a child?⁶⁴

The system of slave labor, held to be peculiarly adapted to southern conditions, was hailed

⁶² Parson Brownlow, "Religion of the Negroes," *Knoxville Whig*, quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, 16: 378 (1858).

⁶³ *De Bow's Review*, 10: 332 (1851).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8: 347 (1850); 9: 614 (1850).

endlessly with phrases describing it as the "natural and intended" state and the "scriptural system" of labor.⁶⁵ The argument—in all its myriad forms—for enslaving Africans as plantation laborers has perhaps never been set down more succinctly than in the *Texas Almanac* barely three years before the outbreak of war:

Every citizen of the United States should be the warm friend, the unceasing advocate and the bold defender of the institution of African slavery, as it exists in the Southern States of the Union. Why?

First: Because the African is an inferior being, differently organized from the white man, with wool instead of hair on his head—with lungs, feet, joints, lips, nose and cranium so distinct as to indicate a different and inferior grade of being. Whether this comes from the curse upon Ham and his descendants forever, or from an original law of God, we will not here discuss. But the great fact is as true as that man exists. The negro is incapable of self-government, or self-improvement, as proven by his universal ignorance and barbarism, though ever in contact with civilized nations, for five thousand years. He has never advanced one step, excepting as a slave to white men. And when civilized and Christianized in slavery, and then freed, he invariably relapses, more or less rapidly, into ignorance and barbarism. Three generations of him as a freeman find him, in his offspring, a confirmed barbarian. The exception is only where he remains surrounded by white civilization, as in the United States, and then he becomes a petty thief and loafer. For proof, look to Jamaica, to San Domingo, to Hayti, to his now acknowledged degeneracy in Liberia and to the freed blacks of the United States and Canada.

He cannot amalgamate with the white race without producing disease and death to the offspring. The mulatto of the fourth degree, unless bred back into the pure white or black, cannot re-produce himself. Hence, the law of God stamps disease and death as the penalty for amalgamation.

Second: As a slave in a mild climate, the negro is contented, cheerful, obedient and a long-lived laborer. He attains his highest civilization in slavery, receives religious instruction—becomes faithful, trustworthy and

⁶⁵ "Slavery in the Abstract . . ." *American Farmer*, 1: 233-234 (December 18, 1839); "Emancipation in the West Indies," *De Bow's Review*, 5: 486 (1848); 7: 213 ff. (1849); "Gov. Hammond's Letters on Slavery," *ibid.*, 8: 252 ff. (1850); 9: 495 ff. (1850); 10: 570 (1851); 17: 179-180 (1854); Robert Collins, "Management of Slaves," *Alabama Planter*, quoted in *ibid.*, 17: 421 (1854); 22: 221 (1857); "Serfs, Not Slaves; or, the Relation Between the Races at the South," quoted in *Southern Cultivator*, 19: 105-111 (1861); "Contact of Race and the Sense of Honor," *Charleston Mercury*, quoted in *ibid.*, 21: 60 (1863).

affectionate to his white master and superior—yields him willing obedience and enjoys his own highest attainable happiness on earth. For proof, look at the negro in his wild native haunts—in his free condition, after having been a slave—and at his past and present happy, contented and healthy condition, as a slave in the Southern States.

Third: As a slave, he produces the great staples of cotton, sugar, rice, hemp, tobacco, coffee, &c., which cannot be grown either by white or free labor to meet the demands of the world. Abolish slavery, and we abolish the production of these great staples. Abolish their production, and we break up the commerce of the civilized world—we destroy the manufactories of Europe and America—we destroy their combined shipping interests—we throw the white man of both continents out of employment, and cause anarchy, revolution and internecine wars to usurp the paths of peaceful commerce, progress and Christian advancement. The Northern States, without manufactures, without commerce, would present one universal scene of waste and desolation in this now great and prosperous confederacy of free and sovereign states. "Ruin" would become the watchword of every civilized State and nation. Relief would only be found, after the total extinction of the negro and the suppression of anarchy through a military despotism in this now great and prosperous confederacy of free and sovereign states. My space is limited by the publishers of the "Texas Almanac," and I can but glance at this great question of questions. But to every citizen of Texas let me say—"These are sober, solemn portentous truths! Look at them! Meet them like men who know their rights!" How to meet them, do you say? By placing in the hands of every man and woman possible, one or more of the excellent books written in elucidation and defence of slavery—by convincing every one of the truths herein so briefly stated—and thus, not only rendering the institution a moral Gibraltar as it is, but convincing every white man of the land that slavery is not only a wise, humane, necessary and glorious institution, in which every one, rich or poor, is vitally interested, and thereby sweeping away, once and forever, the low and unsound misinformed popular feeling of the American people against what is commonly called the "Slave Trade," or the transfer of the beastly, savage negroes of Africa from their ghastly, paganistic slavery there, to the Heaven-ordained and Heaven-approved system of Christian slavery in this country. Do this: repeal the law of Congress: import them in good, well-ventilated ships: look to their health and well-being as a dependent but useful race: break up the present inhuman system of clandestine importation: obey the behests of Heaven to make slaves, like humane Christians, of the heathen: and, in due time, the glorious results will be manifest—for the smiles of Deity will be upon the work.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Texas Almanac* (1858), 132; portions printed in *Southern Cultivator*, 20: 110 (1862).

Behind this elaborate defense of slavery lay the sober fact that the planters believed the peculiar institution to be strongly to their own interest and resented the prospect of emancipation. The *Southern Cultivator* published in 1844 an address delivered in South Carolina that declared:

The time is now at hand when every South Carolinian must prepare for the deadly struggle, which it is to be feared is soon to take place. This institution of slavery whether wise or not, it is madness in us to discuss with men who "seeing will not see, and hearing will not hear!" *It is here so interwoven with every part of society, and so essential to life itself, that its destruction would be ours. Its existence and continuance depend upon our agriculture. As long as slave labor is valuable, so long will slave property be cherished. The instant it ceases to be so it will be thrown aside.*⁶⁷

The doctrine that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson expressed around the close of the eighteenth century, that slavery was growing unprofitable even to the owners, was exhumed, looked at, and rejected. In 1852 the Honorable Willoughby Newton delivered an address before the Virginia State Agricultural Society in which he took Jefferson to task.

Another prominent cause of the failure of all concerted efforts for improvement of agriculture in Virginia may be traced to the erroneous opinion extensively prevailing, as to the character and value of our agricultural labor. Originating at a very early day, (perhaps with Mr. Jefferson, who, however wise as a statesman, was not remarkable for the depth of his philosophy, or the soundness of his practical views,) this error soon became general. The doctrine was taught by philosophers, statesmen and political economists, that slave labor was ruinously expensive and unproductive to its owners, and wherever employed, carried barrenness and desolation in its train. . . . I trust that some gentleman of the Society, of competent talents and information, will, at an early day, thoroughly investigate it, and furnish an essay on the necessary connexion between the institution of slavery and the progress of agricultural improvement in Virginia.

The institution of slavery is a fixed fact; and as wise and practical men, it is our duty to so regard it. Emancipation is an idle dream, beyond the reach of human power. Its accomplishment, were it possible, would be the overthrow not only of all the material interests of the South, but also of the great fabric of moral civilization. Let us be content with our condition. We have a class of laborers, tractable, efficient and profitable. Without them, Virginia would be a wilderness; with them, we may defy the competition of the world.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2: 172 (1844).

⁶⁸ *American Farmer*, 7: 416-417 (June, 1852).

Planters valued enslavement of their laborers because, short of insurrection, they were sure their harvests would be made. No strikes would interrupt the bringing in of a perishable crop. In 1846 "an intelligent Louisianaian" explained to Sir Charles Lyell that the fear of slave-owners of the effect of strikes in agriculture was at the basis of the reasons why emancipation could not come rapidly, but " 'must be the work of time.' " He said further that

"The prejudices of owners have to be overcome, and the sugar and cotton crop is easily lost, if not taken in at once when ripe; the canes being damaged by a slight frost, and the cotton requiring to be picked dry as soon as mature, and being ruined by rain. Very lately a planter, five miles below New Orleans, having resolved to dispense with slave labour, hired one hundred Irish and German emigrants at very high wages. In the middle of the harvest they all struck for double pay. No others were to be had, and it was impossible to purchase slaves in a few days. In that short time he lost produce to the value of ten thousand dollars."⁶⁹

Chancellor Harper asked the rhetorical question in 1851:

Imagine an extensive rice or cotton plantation cultivated by free laborers, who might perhaps *strike* for an increase of wages, at a season when the neglect of a few days would insure the destruction of the whole crop . . . even if it were possible to procure laborers at all, what planter would venture to carry on his operations under such circumstances?⁷⁰

"We, as Southern people," declared a letter to the *Southern Cultivator* in 1860, "are glad to think that we have a labor upon our plantations that frees us from the uncertainties, and caprices of free labor."⁷¹

In the main, masters made life tolerable for their plantation slaves, and many lived happily under the peculiar institution. The great loyalty of slaves during and after the Civil War attests that, and stands over against the instances of brutality that also occurred.⁷² There were even a few Negroes who petitioned to remain in or to enter

⁶⁹ Sir Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to North America* (3rd ed., 2 vols., London, 1855), 2: 162-163.

⁷⁰ *De Bow's Review*, 10: 59 (1851).

⁷¹ *Southern Cultivator*, 18: 204 (1860).

⁷² *Ibid.*, Appendix, 19: 296 (1861); *Charleston Courier*, quoted in *ibid.*, 22: 52 (1864). The theme of the slaves' loyalty to their masters in wartime can be overplayed. In 1864 the *Southern Cultivator* carried a message by a southern governor declaring that it was "unjusti-

slavery. On the occasion of one of these petitions in 1857 a South Carolina newspaper observed confidently, "The woman is very intelligent, and was full aware that a kind master was better able to provide and care for her than she was herself. This is a nut for Yankee philosophers to crack."

But judgment of a social institution does not rest solely on how well men treat their inferiors within its structure. In 1818, before abolition became a movement, the traveller James Flint thought it significant to record this viewpoint of a slave who was reaping wheat on a northern farm when he passed. " 'But you black people are very well treated here?' " he inquired. " 'Oh yes, Sir, master very good to me, give me every thing to eat he eat self, but no Sunday clothes.' " " 'You may live happier than some poor free people?' " pressed Flint. " 'That may be true, Sir,' " was the slave's reply, " 'but put bird in cage, give him plenty to eat, still he fly away.' "⁷³ The reception which Negroes accorded to the news of their emancipation at the conclusion of the war confirmed this answer, and today even the classes which once were masters agree.

The slave laborer was denied access to opportunity for self-employment, and was held to labor for others under the law. He could not quit the plantation to farm for himself. Manumission or purchase of freedom were open to but very few. The slave ran away at his peril. He was advertised, tracked down as a fugitive, and returned to his owner with the help of the law if caught. That many succeeded in making their escape was one of the great complaints of slaveowners. Slave laborers could not use the freeman's weapon of the strike in unison, but must accept the master's discipline and control. Slavery made plantation labor a caste. The bargaining position of the slave was so weak because of his inferior position under the institution itself. He could exact little from his master beyond his maintenance in an efficient condition. "It was this appropriable surplus," concludes the economist L. C. Gray, "that gave slave labor under plantation organization an irresistible ability to displace free labor. . . ."⁷⁴

fiable and unpatriotic for the owner to keep his negroes within such distance of the enemy's lines as to make it easy for them to escape." *Ibid.*, 22: 52 (1864).

⁷³ *Flint's Letters from America, 1818-1820*, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904-7), 9: 40.

⁷⁴ L. C. Gray, "Economic Efficiency and Competitive Advantages of Slavery under the Plantation System," *Agricultural History*, 4: 41 (April, 1930).

Clearly, the restraints which legal slavery placed upon the plantation laborer were in the primary interest of the planter. The planter bore the overhead cost of training primitive laborers and their children to labor, of providing security and livelihood from cradle to the grave. In return he held the laborer as property, and controlled his life in hours of leisure as well as toil. Clothed with great authority which was exercised often with humanity and kindness, planters believed generally that without the discipline of force, the welfare of society, as indeed their own interest and the welfare of the slave, would be subjected to calamity.

Friends of the slave system of plantation labor acknowledged serious abuses. The editor of the *Southern Cultivator*, speaking for them, and to

them, raised the question in 1854—what was the proper remedy?—and made definite answer:

It is conceded that both slave and hireling labor may be abused, and alas, too often are abused. . . . To reform and improve mankind, the true way is to assail wrong-doers with the directness of the New Testament, and not waste talent, time and patience in silly attacks upon institutions, that will die of themselves when their prolonged mission is fulfilled, and which can not be overthrown a day earlier.⁷⁵

His advice went unheeded by history. Within a decade the overthrow of the institution was proclaimed; its end awaited only the final military victory that quickly sealed its doom.

⁷⁵ *Southern Cultivator*, Appendix, 12:105 (1854).

THE AGRICULTURAL POLICIES OF EUGENE TALMADGE

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Eugene Talmadge served as commissioner of agriculture in Georgia for three terms. More of a political opportunist than an agricultural leader, he used his office as commissioner to woo the Georgia farmers who became and remained his principal source of strength during the years that he enjoyed great power and popularity as governor of the state. An examination of his policies and conduct as commissioner shows the means by which he laid the foundation for his subsequent political success.

Talmadge was born and reared on his father's cotton farm in Forsyth County in middle Georgia. He attended the University of Georgia, received a degree in law, and practiced for a few years. In 1911, however, shortly after his marriage, he moved to Telfair County in the wire-grass country, where his wife owned property along Sugar Creek. Talmadge added to this property which he and his wife farmed successfully until his death. Talmadge also practiced law in the county seat of McRae, and there dabbled unsuccessfully in politics.

In 1926, when he was forty-two years old, Talmadge decided to run for the position of commissioner of agriculture although he was generally unknown in the state and had never been elected

to public office. He campaigned against the lax fertilizer inspection laws and the powerful political machine which J. J. Brown, the incumbent commissioner, had built up during four terms in office. Aided by the influential owners of the *Atlanta Constitution* and by the fact that certain employees of the Department of Agriculture turned against Brown, Talmadge conducted a whirlwind campaign and won the election. He was twice re-elected, thus serving as commissioner from 1927 through 1932.

Talmadge's terms of office coincided with a general decline in the prices of agricultural commodities and the onset of the Great Depression. The farmer's plight he attributed largely to lack of good farming methods. Through the medium of the *Market Bulletin*, a weekly paper published by the Department of Agriculture, Talmadge advised farmers on subjects ranging from complete self-sufficiency to whitewashed outbuildings. One project in which he was intensely interested was the improvement of fertilizer. He urged farmers to make their own fertilizer, believing that it would not only be of better quality than commercial products but would also save the farmers