

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

Debates Over Slavery and Abolition: An Interpretative and Historiographical Essay

Orville Vernon Burton

Clemson University

Various source media, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*

Negro Life and Slavery in America

Wrote by
ANGUS B. REACH.
The Music Composed
and dedicated in a word of esteem
George Bond Esq.
BY
HENRY RUSSELL.
LONDON.
CHAPPELL, 50, NEW BOND STREET.

being
ny's fall-
and daily
ent out his
ainly dif-

Account of Ships dispatch'd from the several Ports of GREAT BRITAIN and the PLANTATIONS to the Coast of AFRICA, between Michaelmas 1709, and Michaelmas 1710, on Account of the Separate Traders, the Ten per Cent. Duty paid to the Royal African Company on each Ship, the Number of Pieces of Woollens loaden therein, and the Number of Negroes intended to be loaden in each Vessel: To which is subjoin'd an Account of three of the Company's Ships sent within that Time also.

Ships Names.	Ten per Cent. Duty paid.		Ten per Cent. Duty paid by all Traders and Private Ships together.		Pieces loaden on each Ship.	Value in £.	Car. in Tons.	Long Cloths.	Pices of Woollens.	Stuffs and Blankets.	Woolen Goods.
	l. s. d.	l. s. d.	l. s. d.	l. s. d.							
Loyal Johnfon	69	13	00								200
Houlditch Friggot	112	17	11								270
Three Crowns	103	19	10		1100						35
Thompson Friggot	246	4	00		800						100
Prosperous	28	14	00								110
John and Robert	48	2	00								130
Amelia	375	16	00		2000						500
Rachael	58	16	7		100						500
Hoba Gally	148	7	7		2100						210

TRADE TO THE West-Indies:

CONTAINING

Account of the Casa de Contratacion, or House, its Government, Laws, Ordinances, Official Jurisdiction: Of its Inferiour Courts: Of receiving and sending out Armada's and Fleets: these are: Of the Duties paid to the King: may go over to the Indies, and who not: Of carry'd over: Of all the Sea-Officers: Of the Relation of Sailors: Of Building, Gauging and Rigging of Ships: Of the Ports in the Indies: and more Curious Observations of this Nature.

Written by D. Joseph de Veitia Lincoe. Knight

MILITAIRES.

LES ORPHELINS DU REGIMENT DU GRAND ROMAN INEDIT

PAR MARC MARIO

LOUIS JACOLLIOT

L'AFRIQUE MYSTÉRIEUSE

RELATION UNIVERSELLE DE L'AFRIQUE ANCIENNE ET MODERNE,

On peut voir ce qu'il y a de remarquable.

Slavery is an ugly word, and the vast majority of modern readers would immediately identify it as an ugly concept. Any effort to reintroduce the institution in the United States would no doubt be vigorously resisted by all but a marginal few; most citizens, in fact, would wonder how such a proposal could even be seriously debated, or how support for it could be buttressed by anything other than ignorance or the most unmitigated form of selfishness.

People, however, tend to have short memories (which is why they need historians). Slavery had been a commonly accepted fact of life since before written records began and has lingered in some parts of the world until the present time. In the past, individuals were enslaved, some for being captives, debtors, criminals, or the indigent poor. Sometimes whole groups were placed in bondage. In either case, the purpose of the institution was primarily to provide inexpensive labor and, in some societies, to promote group identity among the enslavers by providing a permanently contrasted "other," which allowed the enslaving group to feel superior. Sometimes individual slaves, or even large groups, were freed. Sometimes too, slaves rose up, often spurred by inspirational leaders such as Moses or Spartacus. Some of these efforts at resistance were more successful than others, but the institution continued through the centuries. The very word *slave* has its roots in the ethnic nomenclature *Slav*, for Slavs were frequently enslaved by their Holy Roman conquerors.

The first African slaves appeared in the English colonies in 1619. Native Americans too were often

enslaved in the seventeenth century, frequently being shipped to the West Indies. Europeans introduced a complex slave trade to their new Indian neighbors, often pitting tribe against tribe to obtain captives to sell into slavery. By the eighteenth century, however, slavery as practiced by Europeans almost exclusively victimized Africans by means of the triangular slave trade.

Slavery in colonial and early America existed in both the North and the South. For example, slavery was common in New York. Even by the Civil War, there were still a few remaining slaves in New Jersey, which had ended slavery through gradual emancipation but like other northern states had become a free state. Further north, New Hampshire still had eighteen slaves at the war's beginning. Slavery, though, moved from being a national problem to an increasingly sectional difference defining North and South in the United States. Several southeastern Indian tribes, in fact, adopted plantation slavery (far different from the kinship slavery they had traditionally practiced, which involved war captives) and began to identify, even after Indian Removal, with their white southern neighbors where slavery was concerned.

Abolitionist organizations arose in the eighteenth century, first in Europe and then in America. Although slavery was common in the British Empire, it existed mostly on colonial plantations; by the 1770s only fifteen thousand Africans were enslaved in England itself, most of them domestic servants. Most English citizens rarely if ever saw the full effects of slavery, and few gave it much thought. This changed in 1772, when the

Bostonian Charles Stuart recaptured his slave James Somerset, who had escaped while accompanying his master on a trip to England. Stuart made preparations to send Somerset to the West Indies for resale. Somerset, however, had made friends. He had been baptized during his stay, and his new godparents interceded on his behalf, issuing a writ of habeus corpus, forcing the issue to trial. Lord Mansfield, chief justice of the King's Bench, issued a judgment that ended: "Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from a decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black must be discharged." Lord Mansfield's decision called into question whether, and how, slavery could be enforced in Great Britain; a large segment of the public wrongly concluded that slavery was abolished, but that was not the case. Regardless of legal decisions made in London, slavery continued to flourish in the West Indies.

The first British abolitionist organization was set up by Quakers in 1783. This was followed, in 1787, by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, whose membership included Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. Clarkson and Sharp tirelessly investigated the slave trade, writing pamphlets and delivering speeches intended to educate the British public about the horrors of slavery. They also heavily promoted the autobiography of the former slave Olaudah Equiano, who joined them on lecture tours. The movement needed a political face, however, and they found it in William Wilberforce, a prominent evangelical member of Parliament. Wilberforce, with the support of powerful political friends such as William Pitt the Younger and Charles Fox, became the most recognized

voice in the abolitionist movement for decades. The anti-slavery group, however, continued to face powerful opposition from planters. Their cause was dealt a blow when Britain went to war with France in 1793, creating an atmosphere in which any protests against the status quo were interpreted as unpatriotic. The abolitionists did not relent, and in 1807 the slave trade was banned in Great Britain. In 1833, benefiting from a national mood for reform in general, they achieved an even greater goal: slavery itself was abolished. Wilberforce learned of the passage of the Abolition of Slavery Act on his deathbed.

London's Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, formed in 1787, served as an inspiration for the visiting Frenchman Jacques Pierre Brissot, who became acquainted with several members. Upon his return to Paris in 1788 Brissot founded the Society of Friends of the Blacks, hoping the two organizations could work together to end the slave trade. Although many politicians and intellectuals joined Brissot's Society, the planters and merchants who benefited from the trade mounted a well-organized publicity campaign that gained them much public support. Society members were sometimes attacked in the streets for their unpopular views.

The successful French Revolution led to the publication, in 1789, of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. The document delineated rights for "all men without exception" and included the statement "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." It did not, however, directly address slavery. The declaration's precepts inspired Julien Raimond to come to France

and present his case to the National Assembly. Raimond, a mulatto who had been born free, owned an indigo plantation in Saint-Domingue (later Haiti). Raimond wanted the French government to ease racial restrictions in Saint-Domingue and to allow its wealthy colonial citizens of color to vote. Supported by friends such as Abbé Henri Grégoire, Vincent Ogé (who was also a freeborn black from the colony), and the Society of Friends of the Blacks, Raimond convinced the assembly to enfranchise freeborn blacks. The decision incensed white colonists, and they refused to enforce it; in turn, Ogé led an unsuccessful insurrection in 1791 and was tortured to death. A few months later a much larger slave revolt began, which would ultimately lead to the formation of Haiti, the first black republic.

Slavery was abolished in France in 1794 but reinstated in 1802, mostly in reaction to Haiti and the failed insurrection in Guadeloupe. The French writer Victor Schoelcher began to publish anti-slavery literature in the 1830s, founding his own abolitionist group in 1834. Appointed undersecretary of state for the colonies after the Revolution of 1848, Schoelcher immediately set up a committee to end slavery. On 27 April 1848 the provisional government accepted and passed the committee's decree to abolish slavery in all French territories, freeing 260,000 slaves.

The United States' Founding Fathers, while writing about freedom and liberty, were ambivalent enough about the subject of slavery to avoid discussing it directly as much as possible; for example, the words *slave* or *slavery* are never mentioned in the Constitution. The American Revolution, a revolution for

liberty, inspired an all too brief moment of manumission among some slaveholders, especially in the North, but also in the South. And some slaves took the opportunity of the British offer of manumission to leave the country. By the early nineteenth century even some white southerners were having doubts about how worthwhile the "peculiar institution" really was, and most of its supporters presented it as a distasteful, necessary evil.

Then, in 1831, the abolition of slavery became a serious topic of conversation. In Boston, Massachusetts, the Christian pacifist William Lloyd Garrison denounced any and all who excused slavery—people, churches, political parties—and founded the *Liberator*, an abolitionist newspaper. While circulation was relatively limited, the paper and his speaking engagements brought attention to the issue of slavery. Later that year, in North Hampton, Virginia, a religiously motivated enslaved man, Nat Turner, led Virginia slaves in a bloody revolt. Because Nat Turner's Rebellion occurred seven months after the first publication of the *Liberator*, many blamed Turner's insurrection on Garrison, linking abolitionism to slave revolt.

Abolitionism developed a newfound immediacy in the aftermath of Turner's slave revolt, which cost the lives of sixty whites and of many more African Americans in retaliation. Even some slave owners, fearful for their families' safety, questioned whether slavery was worth the risk. Some opponents of slavery presented the revolt as proof that men, even slaves, could reach a point where they were willing to die for a chance at freedom. The possibility of ending slavery in the

Commonwealth was taken up by the Virginia legislature and debated vigorously by both sides. In the process of this debate, with the rest of the country anxiously looking on, a southern economist named Thomas Roderick Dew framed an argument in favor of slavery's retention that would be the backbone of proslavery arguments for decades. This spurred even more vigorous debate, and activity, by slavery's opponents.

Dew's approach to slavery was practical, couched in the language of logic. The southern economy would fall apart overnight if slavery were suddenly abolished, and it might never recover. Dew asserted that the slaves might never recover as well. Slavery, in Dew's argument, was a force of "positive good" for both the enslavers and the enslaved. Blacks were too backward to fend for themselves, and it would be cruel to force them to do so; it would be unchristian. Far from being the blight, even perhaps the necessary evil, that generations had considered slavery to be, slavery was now presented as a stabilizing social force for good. Those arguments invigorated some individuals who might before have been embarrassed to promote the institution, even as they benefited from it—individuals such as Thomas Jefferson, who succinctly summed up the problem of slavery: "We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go." Meanwhile, activists and preachers on both sides found a plethora of scriptures to support their respective views. Strong proslavery elements in the North equated abolitionism with the Industrial Revolution, believing that, although slavery definitely needed reform, many of the abolitionists' financial backers were working for their own self-interest, seeking to replace one form of abuse with another (industrialized wage slavery) and

thus gain a more compliant workforce. Slavery, long a source of unease and contention, became the focus of a legitimate national discussion in a way that would be unfathomable to most modern Americans.

As politicians since Jefferson had understood, the slavery question threatened to fragment the nation into dangerous sectional shards, destroying coalitions, parties, and compromises—dissolving the broad middle ground of moderation and common interest itself. To forestall that danger, Congress instituted a congressional "gag rule" in 1836 to prevent debate over slavery. When abolitionist societies in the North were flooding Congress with petitions detailing the horrors of bondage in lurid terms, South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun helped force through legislation requiring that offending appeals be laid on the table, unread, unrecorded, and not open to discussion. Freedom of speech was thus limited in Congress until 1844, when the gag rule was defeated through the leadership of former President John Quincy Adams, the son of the second president, John Adams. "Old Man Eloquent," by then a Massachusetts representative, was unequivocal in his opposition to slavery and commitment to free speech. He ultimately died working at his desk.

Religion played a large role in both proslavery and anti-slavery movements. Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Baptists, while strong in the belief that the Bible condoned slavery, also had important anti-slavery wings. Pope Gregory XVI published an apostolic letter banning Catholic participation in the slave trade, though he did not condemn slavery outright. Taking a position held only by the most daring white Protestants, the New Orleans newspaper *Propagateur Catholique* declared that "the

Negroes are men" regardless of skin color. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church opposed abolition because it feared liberal individualism. Protestant evangelical anti-slavery activists frequently denounced slavery and Catholicism as parallel despotic systems, both opposed to education, free speech, and political liberty. With increasing fervor a minority of reformers began to declare that the worst sin facing America was slavery. Against the laws and customs of community, they posed a higher law of individual conscience and a new vision of social order.

Earlier it had been predominantly southerners who led the most active anti-slavery group, the American Colonization Society. Their program encouraged voluntary emancipation and the colonization of freed slaves in Africa. Very few white Americans could envision a racially egalitarian society in which black people were fully citizens of the republic. Free African Americans in the North were active and vocal opponents of colonization because it meant exile from the home they knew. In 1832, the peak year of emigration to Liberia, only about eight hundred left America, most of them enslaved persons freed on condition of emigrating to Africa. Neither Abraham Lincoln nor Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were abolitionists; both favored voluntary colonization.

African Americans were the strongest advocates for the immediate end of slavery. It was always clear to African Americans that when whites spoke of liberty they limited it to themselves. Not accepting this limitation, virtually all free black community organizations,

including schools, churches, fraternal associations, and mutual aid societies, favored abolition. African American contributions to the abolitionist movement itself began in the Northeast with several "African Societies" during the late eighteenth century. During the 1820s organizations such as the Massachusetts General Colored Association were formed to fight southern slavery and northern segregation, and the African American newspaper *Freedom's Journal*, published in New York in 1827, provided sustained criticisms of slavery. African American abolitionists also preceded white abolitionists in their insistence that moral suasion alone would not effect an end to slavery. In 1829 David Walker, son of a free black mother and enslaved father, published an *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. He advocated uncompromising resistance to slavery, encouraging African Americans to fight "in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom." When Walker's pamphlet was found in the possession of African Americans in Savannah, the Georgia legislature reacted quickly, enacting the death penalty for circulating publications designed to stir insurrection. Seeing danger coming from troublemaking whites as well as enslaved blacks, they enacted severe penalties for teaching slaves to read or write. Other states followed suit.

Forces against abolition were also strong in the North. Abolitionists had to fight against the Constitution, the courts, precedent, expediency, and prejudice. The vast majority of whites blamed abolitionists for stirring up sectional trouble. At best they were scorned and marginalized. At worst they lost their lives. In 1837 an anti-abolitionist mob in Illinois, furious with the Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy and his abolitionist

newspaper, the *Alton Observer*, murdered Lovejoy as he fled the burning building that housed his newspaper.

In Boston, William Lloyd Garrison represented the radical end of the white abolitionist spectrum. While he opposed slave uprisings and violent resistance, Garrison thought that African Americans should "share an equality with whites." He excoriated the Constitution as a proslavery document. He advocated dissolution of the Union in order to establish a true democracy without slavery. Garrison, the ascetic nonconformist, was not a popular man and was once forced to parade through Boston with a noose around his neck.

Among those falling under the influence of Garrison was Frederick Baily. Enslaved in Baltimore, Baily, carrying forged papers as proof that he was a free black sailor, purchased train tickets to Philadelphia and then to New York, where a free African American sailor directed him to the abolitionist David Ruggles. Ruggles sent Frederick and his new wife, Anna, to live with the family of Nathan Johnson, a free and well-to-do African American. To avoid slave catchers, Baily changed his last name to Douglass. Frederick Douglass became a mighty spokesman for abolition. His personal experiences enabled him to counter proslavery propaganda that slaves were content and had an easy life.

Douglass and Garrison came to differ on how best to seek freedom for the enslaved. Douglass disagreed with Garrison that resisting slavery through violence was wrong. The two also disagreed on the Constitution, which Douglass thought could "be wielded in behalf of

emancipation." Like other black Americans, Douglass coupled anti-slavery activities with demands for racial equality and justice. In December 1847 Douglass published the first issue of his abolitionist paper the *North Star*, a four-page weekly out of Rochester, New York. Named after the star pointing the way north to fugitive slaves, the paper printed as its motto, "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren."

Although differences between Garrison and Douglass became bitter and irreconcilable, both men were part of a radical faction that relied on a higher law, or natural law, of individual conscience. Based in Boston, Garrison, Douglass, and their allies—including female anti-slavery activists—pursued moral suasion, which they believed could change hearts radically and so change the world, achieving complete and immediate emancipation, wiping away racism, and advancing the government of God on earth. The Garrisonians held sway across the 1830s. In the 1840s another group, equally religious but more temperate in their hopes for change, came to the fore. Clustered around the New York businessmen and brothers Lewis and Arthur Tappan, this faction focused on political institutions. Where the Boston contingent worked in hired lecture halls, church basements, and shabby newspaper offices, always in search of donations and petition signatures, the New York crowd took a less pie-in-the-sky approach. The Tappanites were mostly lawyers and merchants, well acquainted with the levers of power and the paying of bills, and as much concerned with channeling and limiting social change as initiating it. Firm believers in private property, they repudiated the idea that reformers should rely on a higher law than

the Constitution. To them, civic responsibility in a free society required working within the system. Organizing the political process, with all the mundane labor and pitiful compromises that entailed, the Tappanites worked at the precinct, local, and state levels to elect anti-slavery men. By putting the right men in office, the Tappanites set out to transform the nation and resolve the contradictions the Founding Fathers had institutionalized.

Fired by a conviction that the Constitution was fundamentally anti-slavery, Arthur and Lewis Tappan used the judicial process to defend enslaved Africans who in 1839 had mutinied and taken over the ship *Amistad* from Spanish slavers. The whole idea that the captives might have a right to bring a lawsuit troubled the Spanish minister. Observing the proceedings, Minister Argaiz was incredulous. Why, he wondered, did not the United States government "interpose its authority to put down the irregularity of these proceedings?" The verdict went in favor of the Africans and ultimately was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1841. Lewis Tappan and his associates gave thanks to God that the case established the "liberties of thirty-six fellow-men" as well as the "fundamental principles of law, justice, and human rights."

The two factions of the abolitionist movement, one sentimental and working on moral suasion and the other political and working on civic processes, were not complementary. They made war as bitterly with each other as with the forces of slavery itself. A powerful subtext of race and gender conflict undergirded this

split. At stake, the Tappanites insisted over and over, was the sustained existence of a republic with white men in charge. Anyone attending a Garrisonian rally could understand what they meant. Black orators such as Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Henry "Box" Brown spoke before the gatherings, telling their tales of victimization and loss, breaking hearts and firing passions. White preachers and would-be preachers, such as Henry Beecher, Theodore Weld, and Henry Channing, agitated their audiences with scandalous stories of whipping and rape. White women themselves seized the podium and spoke out in stentorian tones against bondage. Indeed, to many it seemed that the South Carolinian turned abolitionist Sarah Grimké and the stern Quaker Lucretia Mott behaved like men. Worst of all to these critics was the sight of black women such as Sojourner Truth, speaking out, even shouting, and calling all categories of social order into dispute. To many white men, such performances seemed desperately threatening. Though they jeered Amelia Bloomer's ludicrous attempts at dress reform, and smirked at how Lydia Child and Angelina Grimké henpecked their husbands, the changes in gender relations they saw unfolding before them seemed genuinely sobering. The abolitionists in America were part of a broader world reform movement that crossed continents.

Garrison's *Liberator* was filled with news of reform movements in other parts of the world. Even the anti-slavery, gradualist emancipationist, moderate Abraham Lincoln, speaking against the Kansas-Nebraska Bill on 16 October 1854 in Peoria, Illinois, claimed kin to the world's liberal reform movement:

Fellow countrymen—Americans south, as well as north, shall we make no effort to arrest this? Already

the liberal party throughout the world, express the apprehension "that the one retrograde institution in America, is undermining the principles of progress, and fatally violating the noblest political system the world ever saw." This is not the taunt of enemies, but the warning of friends. Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of "moral right," back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of "necessity." Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south—let all Americans—let all lovers of liberty everywhere—join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.

Lincoln understood that the slavery debates in the United States were part of a larger world phenomenon.

Blended with the Garrisonians were all kinds of freethinkers who came to America after their efforts for representative governments, unregulated economic life, and greater civil liberties were crushed throughout Europe, especially after the failed European revolutions of 1848. Anarchists, gender revolutionaries, race-mixers, and communitarians came. Their numbers were swelled by stranger creatures too, preaching

sexual freedom, abolition of the family, and "Red Republicanism." The New Yorkers wanted no part of this mob, because of both their limitless and diffuse radicalism and their tendency to alienate more moderate potential support. To the Tappans and cronies such as the wealthy Gerrit Smith, the elimination of slavery required hard heads, not soft hearts. To them, mobilizing the political power of western territory that was naturally "free soil" and impelling it toward constitutional reform was a practical task destined to doom bondage and reinvigorate the nation, socially and economically.

As for the slaveholders, they had great contempt for the pious, tub-thumping Garrisonians, as well as a ready stock of coiled hemp, but nothing like real fear. When Boston radicals had tried to flood Charleston with anti-slavery pamphlets in the 1830s, South Carolinians used them for a splendid bonfire. When Massachusetts Congressman Samuel Hoar went south in 1844 to survey slavery's evils for himself, vigilante slaveholders waited eagerly for his boat to dock; he declined their grim welcome and hurried home, as they expected. When the abolitionist "Brutus" (actually a turncoat southerner gone north) urged nonslaveholders to rise and slay the master class in 1847, squires employed the opportunity to shore up local support, prying into the details of community life in search of those who might be "soft" on slavery and encouraging their speedy departure. And indeed, southern whites learned to mute their complaints about slavery. Religious opposition to bondage, especially among Quakers and Universalists, was hemmed in and rooted out. In the upper South, moralists were warned to hold their tongues; in Georgia and the Carolinas, they simply

pulled up stakes, establishing new anti-slavery bulwarks north of the Ohio River. Men with few prospects or no desire to ascend into the planter class likewise emigrated to the northwest. The most bitter racists too followed their footsteps, unwilling to live in "a Negro country" any longer. By the mid-1830s, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio were becoming hotbeds of religious moralism, free-soil ideology, and Negrophobia.

Yet none could deny that anti-slavery sentiment was on the increase. Southern slaveholders correctly viewed the small but growing number of abolitionists as part of an international movement steadily encircling them. Mexico abolished slavery in 1829, England in 1832. By 1838 all slaves within the British Empire, including Canada, had been given a gradual emancipation and were free. Over the course of the early nineteenth century, most of the new nations of the Western Hemisphere also gradually abolished slavery when they gained their independence.

As anti-slavery activism grew louder, so did proslavery advocates. Proslavery writers, in addition to seeking sympathy from the North, also needed to convince nonslaveowners, particularly those in the upper South who had a history of animosity and friction with the lower South, and the southern evangelical groups who thought and interpreted the Bible independently. Slaveholders also had to deal with the guilt that lurked in the conscience of many southerners. Although assuredly proslavery, William A. Smith, president of Randolph-Macon College, wrote as late as 1856 that "there are not a few spread throughout our Southern

states whose minds are in a state of great embarrassment on this subject" because of religious beliefs and "the great abstract doctrine of Mr. Jefferson on the sinfulness of slavery."

However, the abolitionist attack on the "peculiar institution" changed the majority white southern viewpoint that slavery was sinful. Brilliant thinkers denied Jefferson's assertion to the contrary and declared that slavery was a "positive good." Senator John C. Calhoun, who built his fortune on slavery, announced in 1838 that southerners, goaded by anti-slavery agitation, now had a new attitude toward slavery. "This agitation has produced one happy effect at least; it has compelled us to the South to look into the nature and character of this great institution, and to correct many false impressions that even we had entertained in relation to it." Whereas southerners used to think that slavery "was a moral and political evil," he declared they had come to a different realization: "we see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world." In South Carolina first and then elsewhere throughout the South, the obvious note of apology was subtracted from discussion of slavery. Slavery was good, they argued, because it brought Africans into civilization and into Christianity. They argued that slavery was beneficial for America because only in the South had conservative values and the measured accumulation of wealth allowed men of leisure to develop a higher sense of duty toward their inferiors and an understanding of their crucial role in the advance of Western civilization. For proslavery theorists, slavery made possible a white man's democracy.

This conversation about slavery continued even after the institution itself had officially died in North America. People continued to talk about slavery, whether it was southern apologists promoting an idyllic vision of their "Lost Cause" or professional and amateur historians who sought meaning in the past but often found reflections of their own time instead. By the early twentieth century, when the Baptist minister and novelist Thomas Dixon's racist vision of *The Clansman* was captivating American audiences in its newest incarnation as the D. W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation*, academia's perception of slavery had come practically into full conformity with Thomas Roderick Dew's defense of it almost a century before.

From the days of James G. Randall and the so-called revisionist school of historians who saw the Civil War as a needless war, one that was more or less bumbled into, influential historians blamed the abolitionists, with some fault to the proslavery theorists who responded, as the major culprits for instigating the war. In the 1960s, with the civil rights movement, a group of younger historians, among them Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Martin Duberman, James M. McPherson, Lawrence Friedman, and Aileen S. Kraditor showed that the abolitionists were essentially altruistic and idealistic, many of them motivated by deeply held religious convictions on the brotherhood of man. David Brion Davis, in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975), challenged this view of the abolitionists, linking their influence to the rise of industrialization: "Liberation from slavery did not mean freedom to live as one chose, but rather freedom to become a diligent, sober, dependable worker who gratefully accepted his position in society." The

foremost critic of Davis has been Thomas L. Haskell, who agrees with the centrality of capitalism in understanding the abolitionists but has argued that "what links the capitalist market to a new sensibility is not class interest so much as the power of market discipline to inculcate altered perceptions of causation in human affairs." This debate raged primarily in issues of the *American Historical Review*, collected by Thomas Bender in his edited *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (1992). Historians of abolitionism have debated the relative merits of the different players as well as the different factions of the abolitionist movement. Emphasis on the role of women and gender and the centrality of free African Americans have become central to the study of abolitionism. Scholars have in the last decade begun to investigate the international connections among abolitionists and other reform groups.

While historians have disagreed over abolitionism, the most contentious arguments among historians have centered on slavery itself. Nowhere have historians disagreed more, and argued more directly with each other and against each other than over the nature and meaning of slavery for the United States. Beginning with the professional historian Ulrich B. Phillips, who argued in 1908 that plantation slavery had been an economic dead end and was already beginning to fade out by the Civil War, historians can be grouped into schools of interpretation. According to Phillips, rather than being motivated purely by economics, the planters had acted against their own immediate interests in the kind treatment of their slaves, civilizing them and providing needed stability in southern society. He also

argued that southerners were driven by a desire to keep their world a "white" world, at least so far as power distribution was concerned. In two influential books, *American Negro Slavery* (1918) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929), Phillips expressed his belief, shared by most of his generation, that slavery was a "school house of civilization" for the enslaved people. Phillips paints slave owners as kind and caring, with slavery dominated by an ethos of paternalism. His sympathetic view of slavery resulted as much from his use of the plantation records—that is, the journals and writings of white owners of slaves—as from his own southern white background. Phillips was a good historian, with many useful insights, if one can remove the underlying racist framework. Phillips had graduate students write dissertations on slavery in each of the southern states. From the 1910s into the 1950s and even early 1960s, Phillips' "paternalistic" view of slavery dominated the history profession. The predominant historical view of slavery was not far removed from that presented in popular movies such as *Gone with the Wind*. Many of Phillips' ideas might seem dated today, but it is worth pointing out that for the rest of the twentieth century it was economics and social structure that served as the underpinnings of the study of slavery, not the political or religious elements that had been considered so important while the institution was "alive."

There were dissenting views of slavery. Herbert Aptheker documented hundreds of slave revolts to show that the "happy slave" was a myth. A number of black scholars, including the sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois and the historian John Hope Franklin, also argued against Phillips' paternalistic view of slavery. But it was

not until 1956, when Kenneth M. Stampp asserted that slavery *was* profitable and that profit was what propelled it, that an alternative historical school of slavery came into existence. He also argued that it had been a matter of truly harsh economics, for slavery was a brutal and cruel practice. In *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South*, Stampp systematically rebutted the interpretation of slavery in Phillips' books chapter by chapter. Stampp used not only the planters' manuscript records that Phillips had used but also newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves and some former slaves' accounts of slavery. Stampp, influenced by the emerging civil rights movement, stated an integrationist view that inspired many whites at the time but offended many black intellectuals when he stated, "I have assumed that the slaves were merely ordinary human beings, that innately Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less." But Stampp's description of the brutality of slavery caused people to wonder what were the consequences on the enslaved people of such harsh conditions of life.

For a short time a debate raged in the history profession between those who thought that Phillips was correct in his interpretation of a paternalistic slavery and those who supported Stampp's view of a harsh slave regime. In 1959 Stanley Elkins attempted to break up what he believed was a sterile debate by introducing psychological and comparative history into the discussion of American slavery. Elkins soon provided a counter for the second half of Phillips' argument; he wrote about slavery as a psychologically oppressive system, creating the same sort of mental effects on its victims as had the Holocaust. According to Elkins,

Stampp was correct, and the viciousness of slavery left former enslaved people so emotionally scarred that they were unable to function in American society, becoming dependents rather than participants.

The next generation of scholars was eager to engage Elkins' ideas, specifically his assertion that slaves had no culture of their own because of their harsh treatment. The "community and culture" school announced itself most forcefully in 1972 with the almost simultaneous publication of the African American historian John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* and the sociologist George P. Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup*. Both books were based on exhaustive research in primary sources emanating from the slaves themselves—Blassingame in the nineteenth-century autobiographies of escaped slaves, Rawick in the Federal Writers Project interviews with former slaves in the 1930s. Feliculously written and published by a major press, Blassingame's book received the most attention. Indeed, Rawick's book was published as the first volume of a forty-one-volume series of facsimile reprints of the typescripts of those interviews.

The "slave community school" produced many works examining the ways in which slave communities had functioned and even found agency. One of the leading examples, Eugene D. Genovese's monumental *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) not only focused on slave community in fresh ways, it also grappled with economic and social questions that could be traced back to Phillips and found valuable insights on black-white relations in Phillips. Genovese argued

that there was reciprocity among slaves and masters but that masters lived by a paternalistic cultural ethos and ruled both slaves and other whites through hegemony. Genovese's book was soon followed by Herbert G. Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), and Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977), both of which took exception to Genovese's revised paternalism interpretation of slavery. These "community and culture" historians held that despite the power of the master class slaves were able to find space for themselves and create a syncretic African American culture and community rooted in the family, religion, and a folk culture of resistance. The English historian Peter Parish dubbed Blassingame, Genovese, Gutman, and Levine "the New Testament of slavery studies." They showed considerable variation in negotiating a difficult and uncertain course between emphasizing the achievements of the slaves and the environment in which that achievement took place, not to mention assessing the role played by the African heritage in that achievement. Ira Berlin wrote that "the slaves' history—like all human history—was made not only by what was done to them but also by what they did for themselves." In the 1980s community studies such as Charles Joyner's *Down By the Riverside* (1984) and Orville Vernon Burton's *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions* (1985) tended to reinforce this general interpretation while filling in details and pointing out exceptions.

By the late 1980s, however, complaints were being voiced that the studies of what had come to be called the "culture and community" school romanticized the slave experience. As early as 1971 Joel Williamson had

argued that "most of what constituted black culture was a survival response to the world the white man made." In 1983 John B. Boles revisited an earlier theme in *Black Southerners*, arguing that whites actually asserted considerable control over black religious practices. At the same time, community scholars such as Burton and Joyner added the awareness that place mattered. Where the slaves were, what they grew, and who their masters were influenced a great deal of their lives.

It was Peter Kolchin, however, who levelled the most severe criticisms of the community school in his *Unfree Labor* (1987) and *American Slavery* (1993, 2003). Arguing partly on the basis of his comparative work with Russian serfdom, Kolchin held that the close proximity in which southern masters and slaves lived dramatically stifled the slave's opportunity for cultural autonomy and self-expression. He even contended in *American Slavery* that there was no such thing as a "slave community" but only a shared sense of identification with fellow sufferers. There were some chances for slave autonomy, but very, very few.

Another line of revision was put forth in William Dusinger's *Them Dark Days* (1996). Dusinger contends that slavery on the South Carolina rice plantations was far harsher than generally assumed. The child mortality rate for those under age fifteen was 28 percent for the general population and 48 percent for slaves in general, but it was 66 percent for rice plantation slaves. These figures continue to underline the importance of place. However, Dusinger argues, contrary to Kolchin, that there was indeed a form of

slave community, albeit one of endurance rather than mere autonomy.

A third line of revision came from Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985) in which she argues that slavery was qualitatively different for women and that an overreliance on patriarchy as an explanatory factor in the context of the slave community is a mistake. A huge literature has now developed on slavery and gender, which examines issues of space, place, race, and even the concept of the "body."

None of the "culture and community" scholars individually romanticized the slave experience. They had all read Stamp and Elkins, and they took slavery's harshness to be already convincingly established. But they were also influenced by what they considered the obvious neglect of black culture and black achievement inherent in any emphasis on slavery's traumatic and pathological effects. Individually they neither portrayed slavery as an easy life nor contended that the cultural achievement of the slaves had been an easy one. It soon became obvious, however, that the impression conveyed by a series of studies may be different from that conveyed by any one of them separately.

Much remains unknown or dimly perceived. Perhaps it could be said that slavery was commercial but not capitalist. Or perhaps it would be more nearly accurate to say that slavery was capitalist, but qualitatively different from merchant or industrial capitalism. Certainly by the late antebellum period a vast amount of southern social, intellectual, and political capital was invested in slavery. But just as certainly, American slavery was more than an economic system. Sundown

to sunup in the quarters was as important as sunup to sundown in the fields in creating a cohesive African American culture, perhaps more so. Remembered African traditions combined with encountered European traditions in a new American environment to create a new African American culture and a new African American community.

A new synthesis may be forthcoming, but its emergence will have to await a patient sifting of the various state and local studies of slavery and perhaps even more research in specific communities. Place matters a great deal to the understanding of slavery, for how the location, crop, and size of the farm or plantation and the proclivities of a specific master intersected with the gender, age, occupation, and attitudes of a specific slave made a material difference to each and every enslaved person.

Historians continue to find new ways to look at slavery, and new arguments to propound. Slavery is not a closed question, nor is it dead; to assume so would be as unwise as ignoring a serpent in the shadows and would block our efforts to understand it and curtail its lingering effects. In the eyes of some, the question was ultimately settled on the grisly fields of battle. Although slavery as an institution in the United States did in fact end in the final echoes of the Civil War, arguments for its justification would live on in Lost Cause mythology and beyond. Historians still argue about its causes and effects; it still marks our national psyche. Its chains clink in the shadows, restless whispers echo in the house we have inherited, reminding us that the past, to

paraphrase William Faulkner, is never quite as dead as we would wish it to be.

CITATION

Burton, Orville Vernon: "Debates Over Slavery and Abolition: An Interpretative and Historiographical Essay." *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*: Cengage Learning, 2009

© Cengage Learning 2014

**REQUEST A
FREE TRIAL**

**CONTACT YOUR
REPRESENTATIVE**

**FIND OUT MORE
ON OUR WEBSITE**