

The South and the Slavery Controversy, 1793–1860

Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.

Abraham Lincoln, 1865

Prologue: In slavery, the southerners had a bear by the tail: to hang on was embarrassing; to let go would be costly and seemingly dangerous. So situated, they put the best face they could on their “peculiar institution” and freely quoted the Bible to defend an archaic practice that both God and Jesus had tolerated, if not sanctioned. The abolitionists, especially the Garrisonians, harped on the evils of slavery; the white southerners stressed its benefits. The truth lay somewhere between. Certainly most slaveowners were not sadists. Self-interest, if not humanity, was a strong though not infallible deterrent to mayhem. Yet slavery was a grave moral offense, especially in a “free” society, even if the slaves did sometimes preserve their dignity and if some masters were kind. The slaves were seldom beaten to death, and as a rule, families were not needlessly separated. Slaves were discouraged from learning to read and encouraged to embrace the Christian religion, which is often the solace of the oppressed. Despite the manifest immorality of slavery, countless northerners, with a financial stake in slave-grown cotton, deplored the boat-rocking tactics of the abolitionists.

A. The Face of Slavery

I. A Slave Boy Learns a Lesson (c. 1827)

The amazing Frederick Douglass, sired by an unknown white father, was born in Maryland to a slave woman. He learned to read and write; after suffering much cruel usage, he escaped to the North, where, despite mobbings and beatings, he became a leading abolitionist orator and journalist. A commanding figure of a man, he raised black regiments during the Civil War, and in 1889 became U.S. minister to the republic of Haiti. He showed impartiality in his two marriages: his first wife, he

¹*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn.: Park, 1882), pp. 94–97.

quipped, was the color of his mother and his second (despite a storm of criticism) was that of his father. From the following passage in his autobiography, ascertain why slaveholders were willing to have their slaves know the Bible but not read it.

The frequent hearing of my mistress reading the Bible aloud—for she often read aloud when her husband was absent—awakened my curiosity in respect to this mystery of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn. Up to this time I had known nothing whatever of this wonderful art, and my ignorance and inexperience of what it could do for me, as well as my confidence in my mistress, emboldened me to ask her to teach me to read.

With an unconsciousness and inexperience equal to my own, she readily consented, and in an incredibly short time, by her kind assistance, I had mastered the alphabet and could spell words of three or four letters. My mistress seemed almost as proud of my progress as if I had been her own child, and supposing that her husband would be as well pleased, she made no secret of what she was doing for me. Indeed, she exultingly told him of the aptness of her pupil, and of her intention to persevere in teaching me, as she felt her duty to do, at least to read the Bible. . . .

Master Hugh was astounded beyond measure, and probably for the first time proceeded to unfold to his wife the true philosophy of the slave system, and the peculiar rules necessary in the nature of the case to be observed in the management of human chattels. Of course, he forbade her to give me any further instruction, telling her in the first place that to do so was unlawful, as it was also unsafe. “For,” said he, “if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible, it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself.”

2. A Former Slave Exposes Slavery (1850)

Flogged without effect by his master, Douglass was hired out for one year to a notorious “slave breaker,” who also professed to be a devout Methodist. Worked almost to death in all kinds of weather, allowed five minutes or less for meals, and brutally whipped about once a week, Douglass admitted that “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me—in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died out; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed to a brute!” In this abolitionist speech in Rochester, New York, Douglass spoke from bitter experience. In what respects were the nonphysical abuses of slaves worse than the physical ones? Where was the system most unjust?

²Quoted in Irving Mark and E. L. Schwaab, eds., *The Faith of Our Fathers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), pp. 157–159.

More than twenty years of my life were consumed in a state of slavery. My childhood was environed by the baneful peculiarities of the slave system. I grew up to manhood in the presence of this hydra-headed monster—not as a master—not as an idle spectator—not as the guest of the slaveholder; but as A SLAVE, eating the bread and drinking the cup of slavery with the most degraded of my brother bondmen, and sharing with them all the painful conditions of their wretched lot. In consideration of these facts, I feel that I have a right to speak, and to speak strongly. Yet, my friends, I feel bound to speak truly. . . .

First of all, I will state, as well as I can, the legal and social relation of master and slave. A master is one (to speak in the vocabulary of the Southern states) who claims and exercises a right of property in the person of a fellow man. This he does with the force of the law and the sanction of Southern religion.

The law gives the master absolute power over the slave. He may work him, flog him, hire him out, sell him, and in certain contingencies kill him with perfect impunity.

The slave is a human being, divested of all rights—reduced to the level of a brute—a mere “chattel” in the eye of the law—placed beyond the circle of human brotherhood—cut off from his kind. His name, which the “recording angel” may have enrolled in heaven among the blest, is piously inserted in a master’s ledger with horses, sheep, and swine.

In law a slave has no wife, no children, no country, and no home. He can own nothing, possess nothing, acquire nothing, but what must belong to another. To eat the fruit of his own toil, to clothe his person with the work of his own hands, is considered stealing.

He toils, that another may reap the fruit. He is industrious, that another may live in idleness. He eats unbolted meal, that another may eat the bread of fine flour. He labors in chains at home, under a burning sun and biting lash, that another may ride in ease and splendor abroad. He lives in ignorance, that another may be educated. He is abused, that another may be exalted. He rests his toil-worn limbs on the cold, damp ground, that another may repose on the softest pillow. He is clad in coarse and tattered raiment, that another may be arrayed in purple and fine linen. He is sheltered only by the wretched hovel, that a master may dwell in a magnificent mansion. And to this condition he is bound down by an arm of iron.

From this monstrous relation there springs an unceasing stream of most revolting cruelties. The very accompaniments of the slave system stamp it as the offspring of hell itself. To ensure good behavior, the slaveholder relies on the whip. To induce proper humility, he relies on the whip. To rebuke what he is pleased to term insolence, he relies on the whip. To supply the place of wages, as an incentive to toil, he relies on the whip. To bind down the spirit of the slave, to imbrute and destroy his manhood, he relies on the whip, the chain, the gag, the thumb-screw, the pillory, the bowie knife, the pistol, and the bloodhound. . . .

There is a still deeper shade to be given to this picture. The physical cruelties are indeed sufficiently harassing and revolting; but they are as a few grains of sand on the sea shore, or a few drops of water in the great ocean, compared with the stupendous wrongs which it inflicts upon the mental, moral, and religious nature of its hapless victims. It is only when we contemplate the slave as a moral and intellectual

being that we can adequately comprehend the unparalleled enormity of slavery, and the intense criminality of the slaveholder.

3. Human Cattle for Sale (c. 1850)

Slave auctions, ugly affairs at best, received top billing in abolitionist propaganda. Here is an account, less sensational than many, by Solomon Northup, a free black of New York State. Kidnapped in Washington, D.C., and enslaved on a Louisiana plantation, he luckily managed to regain his freedom. His narrative, edited and perhaps ghostwritten by a New York lawyer, bears the earmarks of credibility. What aspect of this New Orleans slave auction, held by a Mr. Freeman, would be most likely to wound northern sensibilities?

Next day many customers called to examine Freeman's "new lot" [of slaves]. The latter gentleman was very loquacious, dwelling at much length upon our several good points and qualities. He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase.

Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.

One old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me. From his conversation with Freeman, I learned he was a resident of the city [New Orleans]. I very much desired that he would buy me, because I conceived it would not be difficult to make my escape from New Orleans on some Northern vessel. Freeman asked him \$1,500 for me. The old gentleman insisted it was too much, as times were very hard. Freeman, however, declared that I was sound and healthy, of a good constitution, and intelligent. He made it a point to enlarge upon my musical attainments. The old gentleman argued quite adroitly that there was nothing extraordinary about the nigger, and finally, to my regret, went out, saying he would call again.

During the day, however, a number of sales were made. David and Caroline were purchased together by a Natchez planter. They left us, grinning broadly, and in the most happy state of mind, caused by the fact of their not being separated. Lethe was sold to a planter of Baton Rouge, her eyes flashing with anger as she was led away.

The same man also purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza [the mother] was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him unless he also bought herself and Emily. She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively.

³Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1853), pp. 79–82.

Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. He would not have such work—such sniveling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick—if he didn't, might he be d——d.

Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman could not wholly silence the afflicted mother. She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously, not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises—how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life, if he would only buy them all together.

But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her—all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain.

4. *Cohabitation in the Cabins (c. 1834)*

As the once-fertile lands of Maryland and Virginia petered out, the producing of slaves often proved more profitable than the producing of tobacco. Blacks were bred for export to the newly opened cotton lands of the booming Southwest. Frederick Douglass, in his reminiscences, here recounts how his Maryland slave breaker, Mr. Covey, laid the foundations of riches. What does Douglass find most objectionable?

In pursuit of this object [wealth], pious as Mr. Covey was, he proved himself as unscrupulous and base as the worst of his neighbors. In the beginning he was only able—as he said—“to buy one slave”; and scandalous and shocking as is the fact, he boasted that he bought her simply “as a breeder.” But the worst of this is not told in this naked statement. This young woman (Caroline was her name) was virtually compelled by Covey to abandon herself to the object for which he had purchased her; and the result was the birth of twins at the end of the year. At this addition to his human stock Covey and his wife were ecstatic with joy. No one dreamed of reproaching the woman or finding fault with the hired man, Bill Smith, the father of the children, for Mr. Covey himself had locked the two up together every night, thus inviting the result.

But I will pursue this revolting subject no farther. No better illustration of the unchaste, demoralizing, and debasing character of slavery can be found than is furnished in the fact that this professedly Christian slaveholder, amidst all his prayers and hymns, was shamelessly and boastfully encouraging and actually compelling, in his own house, undisguised and unmitigated fornication, as a means of increasing his stock. It was the system of slavery which made this allowable, and which condemned the slaveholder for buying a slave woman and devoting her to this life no

¹*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn.: Park, 1882), pp. 150–151.

more than for buying a cow and raising stock from her; and the same rules were observed, with a view to increasing the number and quality of the one as of the other.

5. From Slavery to Freedom (1835)

African-born James L. Bradley was one of many slaves who purchased their freedom out of their own hard-gained, meager earnings. Bradley eventually made his way to the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, a hotbed of abolitionist sentiment presided over by Lyman Beecher, father of the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe. There he wrote the following short account of his life. What did he see as the worst aspects of slavery? What did his ability to purchase his freedom imply about the character of the slave system? What was his attitude toward Christianity?

I will try to write a short account of my life, as nearly as I can remember; though it makes me sorrowful to think of my past days; for they have been very dark and full of tears. I always longed and prayed for liberty, and had at times hopes that I should obtain it. I would pray, and try to study out some way to earn money enough to buy myself, by working in the night-time. But then something would happen to disappoint my hopes, and it seemed as though I must live and die a slave, with none to pity me.

I will begin as far back as I can remember. I think I was between two and three years old when the soul-destroyers tore me from my mother's arms, somewhere in Africa, far back from the sea. They carried me a long distance to a ship; all the way I looked back, and cried. The ship was full of men and women loaded with chains; but I was so small, they let me run about on deck.

After many long days, they brought us into Charleston, South Carolina. A slaveholder bought me, and took me up into Pendleton County. I suppose that I staid with him about six months. He sold me to a Mr. Bradley, by whose name I have ever since been called. This man was considered a wonderfully kind master; and it is true that I was treated better than most of the slaves I knew. I never suffered for food, and never was flogged with the whip; but oh, my soul! I was tormented with kicks and knocks more than I can tell. My master often knocked me down, when I was young. Once, when I was a boy, about nine years old, he struck me so hard that I fell down and lost my senses. I remained thus some time, and when I came to myself, he told me he thought he had killed me. At another time, he struck me with a currycomb, and sunk the knob into my head. I have said that I had food enough; I wish I could say as much concerning my clothing. But I let that subject alone, because I cannot think of any suitable words to use in telling you.

I used to work very hard. I was always obliged to be in the field by sunrise, and I labored till dark, stopping only at noon long enough to eat dinner. When I was about fifteen years old, I took what was called the cold plague, in consequence of being over-worked, and I was sick a long time. My master came to me one day, and hearing me groan with pain, he said, "This fellow will never be of any more use to

⁵*Fourth Annual Report of the Trustees of the Cincinnati Lane Seminary*; Lane Seminary, Ohio (1834), p. 27.

me—I would as soon knock him in the head, as if he were an opossum.” His children sometimes came in, and shook axes and knives at me, as if they were about to knock me on the head. But I have said enough of this. The Lord at length raised me up from the bed of sickness, but I entirely lost the use of one of my ankles. Not long after this, my master moved to Arkansas Territory, and died. Then the family let me out; but after [line illegible] the plantation, saying she could not do with me. My master had kept me ignorant of everything he could. I was never told anything about God, or my own soul. Yet from the time I was fourteen years old, I used to think a great deal about freedom. It was my heart’s desire; I could not keep it out of my mind. Many a sleepless night I have spent in tears, because I was a slave. I looked back on all I had suffered—and when I looked ahead, all was dark and hopeless bondage. My heart ached to feel within me the life of liberty. After the death of my master, I began to contrive how I might buy myself. After toiling all day for my mistress, I used to sleep three or four hours, and then get up and work for myself the remainder of the night. I made collars for horses, out of plaited husks. I could weave one in about eight hours; and I generally took time enough from my sleep to make two collars in the course of a week. I sold them for fifty cents each. One summer, I tried to take two or three hours from my sleep every night; but I found that I grew weak, and I was obliged to sleep more. With my first money I bought a pig. The next year I earned for myself about thirteen dollars; and the next about thirty. There was a good deal of wild land in the neighborhood that belonged to Congress. I used to go out with my hoe, and dig up little patches, which I planted with corn, and got up in the night to tend it. My hogs were fattened with this corn, and I used to sell a number every day. Besides this, I used to raise small patches of tobacco, and sell it to buy more corn for my pigs. In this way I worked for five years, at the end of which time, after taking out my losses, I found that I had earned one hundred and sixty dollars. With this money I hired my own time for two years. During this period, I worked almost all the time night and day. The hope of liberty strung my nerves, and braced up my soul so much, that I could do with very little sleep or rest. I could do a great deal more work than I was ever able to do before. At the end of the two years, I had earned three hundred dollars, besides feeding and clothing myself. I now bought my time for eighteen months longer, and went two hundred and fifty miles west, nearly into Texas, where I could make more money. Here I earned enough to buy myself; which I did in 1833, about one year ago. I paid for myself, including what I gave for my time, about seven hundred dollars.

As soon as I was free, I started for a free State. When I arrived in Cincinnati, I heard of Lane Seminary, about two miles out of the city. I had for years been praying to God that my dark mind might see the light of knowledge. I asked for admission into the Seminary. They pitied me, and granted my request, though I knew nothing of the studies which were required for admission. I am so ignorant, that I suppose it will take me two years to get up with the lowest class in the institution. But in all respects I am treated just as kindly, and as much like a brother by the students, as if my skin were as white, and my education as good as their own. Thanks to the Lord, prejudice against colour does not exist in Lane Seminary! If my life is spared, I shall probably spend several years here, and prepare to preach the gospel.

I will now mention a few things, that I could not conveniently bring in, as I was going along with my story.

In the year 1828, I saw some Christians, who talked with me concerning my soul, and the sinfulness of my nature. They told me I must repent, and live to do good. This led me to the cross of Christ;—and then, oh, how I longed to be able to read the Bible! I made out to get an old spelling-book, which I carried in my hat for many months, until I could spell pretty well, and read easy words. When I got up in the night to work, I used to read a few minutes, if I could manage to get a light. Indeed, every chance I could find, I worked away at my spelling-book. After I had learned to read a little, I wanted very much to learn to write; and I persuaded one of my young masters to teach me. But the second night, my mistress came in, bustled about, scolded her son, and called him out. I overheard her say to him, “You fool! what are you doing? If you teach him to write, he will write himself a pass and run away.” That was the end of my instruction in writing; but I persevered, and made marks of all sorts and shapes I could think of. By turning every way, I was, after a long time, able to write tolerably plain.

I have said a good deal about my desire for freedom. How strange it is that anybody should believe any human being *could* be a slave, and yet be contented! I do not believe there ever was a slave, who did not long for liberty. I know very well that slave-owners take a great deal of pains to make the people in the free States believe that the slaves are happy; but I know, likewise, that I was never acquainted with a slave, however well he was treated, who did not long to be free. There is one thing about this, that people in the free States do not understand. When they ask slaves whether they wish for their liberty, they answer, “No;” and very likely they will go so far as to say they would not leave their masters for the world. But at the same time, they desire liberty more than anything else, and have, perhaps, all along been laying plans to get free. The truth is, if a slave shows any discontent, he is sure to be treated worse, and worked the harder for it; and every slave knows this. This is why they are careful not to show any uneasiness when white men ask them about freedom. When they are alone by themselves, all their talk is about liberty—liberty! It is the great thought and feeling that fills the mind full all the time.

6. A Slave Woman’s Tale

Though the slave system was cruel and oppressive, the African American bondsmen and bondswomen could sometimes succeed in asserting their dignity, and could find the means to wed and to worship, to love and to laugh. In the following interview, conducted in the 1930s, ex-slave Annie Coley tells her life story. What areas of freedom, however limited, does she identify within the slave system? How does she describe the situation of women in slavery? What does her account imply about the relationship between masters and slaves? What differences did she see between slavery and freedom?

⁶George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), Supplement, Series 1, vol. 7, Mississippi Narratives, Part 2, pp. 438–446. (The interview, originally recorded in dialect, is here rendered in standard English.)

My mammy told me I was a slave going on five years. I don't remember myself, I have to go by what my mammy and pappy say. I was born twenty miles above Camden, South Carolina. My pappy was Ben Jones, but after Big Boss Truesler bought him, he was called Ben Truesler. Rhody was my mammy's name.

All of us colored folks lived in loghouses in the quarters then. We didn't have any beds and mattresses like we have now. There were just bunks built in the wall with sacks filled with hay to lay on. All of us children slept on the floor.

Boss lived in a big white house, two story, with big white posts in front. He could look out from the upstairs windows and see what all the niggers were doing in the fields.

We worked in the fields in the cotton and the corn, from early morning till sun-down. Saturdays, all day, just the same. Sundays we could rest. Big Boss gave each colored man a piece of ground to make a crop of corn and cotton for himself. Sundays each nigger worked out his own crop.

After the crop was laid by, we went with Big Boss to his church and sat in the back seats. We couldn't any of us read the Bible, so that was why Boss made us go to church, so that we could hear it read.

One Sunday, there was a mighty good preacher, and one old religious-hearted colored man got happy and rose up and shouted till he disturbed the preacher. At dinner Boss said, "Uncle, you must sit still this evening and not do no shoutin'! If you sit still, I will buy you a brand new pair of boots."

That evening the old man sat still as long as he could. But when the preacher began to tell about heaven and farewell to this world, the old colored man went wild. He rose up in his seat and yelled, "Boss, boots or no boots, I'm going to shout."

We bought Sunday clothes with our cotton money. Boss gave us plenty good work clothes. We got to rest three days at Christmas. We had a big dinner, but Boss gave us that out of his smokehouse. . . .

My mammy had a heap of children in slavery time, one every other year. She had them so fast that they took her out of the field and put her to weaving cloth, ten yards a day. She kept on having them until she had twelve head, and then she never did have any more. She had a heap of them before me, I was the seventh child.

My Boss's overseer was a poor white man, but he was good to us colored folks. Once some nigger women got to fighting in the cotton field. Boss brought them all to the gallery of the big house, and gave them all a lick or two with a whip, then sent them back to the field and told them to behave themselves.

But old Boss Jones had a mean overseer who took advantage of the women in the fields. One time he slammed a nigger woman down that was heavy, and caused her to have her baby—dead. The nigger women in the quarters jumped on him and said they were going to take him to a brushpile and burn him up. But their men hollered for them to turn him loose. Then Big Boss Jones came and made the women go back to the quarters. He said, "I ain't whipped these wretches for a long time, and I aim to whip them this evening." But all the women hid in the woods that evening, and Boss never said any more about it. He sent the overseer away and never did have any more overseers. He and his little boys looked over the work in the fields.

Yes, I saw a nigger in chains once. He was my mammy's brother. He stole the house girl and ran off with her to Camden. Big Boss brought him back, whipped him, and kept him chained in the kitchen for two weeks. Every morning Boss would go in the kitchen and whip him again.

His daddy, old Mike, who was my grandpa, was a wagon and buggy maker. He stayed in the shop all the time, and never did work in the fields. He made wagons and buggies for the white folks, and made big money for Boss, over a hundred dollars a month. Old Mike kept getting madder and madder about the way Boss treated his boy. He went plum crazy, and ran after Boss in the big house, yelling "This day, my Boss and I are both going to die." Boss, he ran upstairs, and old Missus locked him in a closet and then locked herself in the room.

Then old Mike ran to the kitchen and turned his boy loose. They both went back to the quarters, and Mike went on awhile for two or three days. Then he went back to the shop and went to work. But Boss was afraid of him and never did talk to him no more. Old Missus tended to the business in the shop and collected the money. The white men told Boss, "You should have whipped that nigger and sent him back to the field. Now you have driven your best nigger crazy. . . ."

There weren't any schools for the niggers in slavery days. After freedom, I went to night school in Camden and learned out of the old Blue Back Speller. The teacher was a white lady—there weren't any colored folks then who could teach us.

I never joined church until I was grown and married; let me see, I was twenty-two. I don't want to live no other life but a Christian life, so I'll be saved and go home to rest, for the Bible says the wicked will be left here and burned up. . . .

We didn't have any weddings on our plantation in those days. Boss just gave us a script saying we were man and wife. If a man wanted a girl from another plantation, Boss bought her or traded for her. . . .

My mammy told me when a slave was sick, the Boss man dosed her with medicine. If she didn't get any better, he had a doctor come. If a slave died, he was laid out, locked up in the house, and all the other niggers had to go back to the field. Slaves weren't allowed any time off for burials, so the colored folks had to bury their dead at night.

Yes, we sang at the burials, and at church, and while we were at work. Those old black folks just studied up their songs in their heads. How did we do it? I heard a Bishop say that God gave the black folks wisdom to study out those songs. . . .

Let me say one word about slavery. When we were under the white folks, there was none of this killing and murdering like there is now. There weren't any hangings because there wasn't anybody to hang.

I asked my ma, after freedom, were there the same laws in slavery time as there are now. And she said, "Yes, honey, we had the same laws, but there wasn't anybody to use them on in those days."

7. *The Sundering of Families (1874)*

The brutality of whip and branding iron was monstrous, but slavery's greatest psychological horror was the cruel separation of family members. In the following account, Lorenzo Ivy, the son of a slave cobbler on a Virginia plantation, describes his family's efforts, not always successful, to stay together. How did the spread of the cotton economy (what Ivy refers to as the "cotton fever") increase the suffering of the slaves?

Times have changed so fast in the last ten years, that I often ask myself who am I, and why am I not on my master's plantation, working under an overseer, instead of being here in this institution [Hampton Institute, in Virginia, founded as a school for freed slaves after the Civil War], under the instruction of a school-teacher. I was born in 1849. My master was very good to his slaves, and they thought a great deal of him. But all of our happy days were over when he went South and caught the cotton fever. He was never satisfied till he moved out there. He sold the house before any of the black people knew anything about it, and that was the beginning of our sorrow. My father belonged to another man, and we knew not how soon we would be carried off from him. Two of my aunts were married, and one of them had ten children, and both of their husbands belonged to another man. Father and my uncles went to their masters and asked them to buy their families. They tried to, but our master wouldn't sell, and told [them] how many hundred dollars' worth of cotton he could make off us every year, and that we little chaps were just the right size to climb cotton-stalks and pick cotton. But our master and father's master had once agreed that if either one of them ever moved away, he would sell out to the other. So father's master sent for the other gentlemen who heard the conversation, and they said it was true. After a day or two's consideration, he agreed to let him have mother and the seven children for \$12,000. That released us from sorrow. But it was not so with my aunts; they had lost all hope of being with their husbands any longer; the time was set for them to start; it was three weeks from the time we were sold. Those three weeks did not seem as long as three days to us who had to shake hands for the last time with those bound together with the bands of love.

Father said he could never do enough for his master for buying us. They treated us very well for the first three or four years—as the saying was with the black people, they fed us on soft corn at first and then choked us with the husk. When I was large enough to use a hoe, I was put under the overseer to make tobacco-hills. I worked under six overseers, and they all gave me a good name to my master. I only got about three whippings from each of them. The first one was the best; we did not know how good he was till he went away to the war. Then times commenced getting worse with us. I worked many a day without any thing to eat but a tin cup of buttermilk and a little piece of corn-bread, and then walk two miles every night or so to carry the overseer his dogs; if we failed to bring them, he would give us a nice flogging.

⁷Mrs. M. F. Armstrong and Helen W. Ludlow, *Hampton and Its Students* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1874), pp. 78–80.

When the war closed, our master told all the people, if they would stay and get in the crop, he would give them part of it. Most of them left; they said they knew him too well. Father made us all stay, so we all worked on the remainder of the year, just as if Lee hadn't surrendered. I never worked harder in my life, for I thought the more we made, the more we would get. We worked from April till one month to Christmas. We raised a large crop of corn and wheat and tobacco, shucked all the corn and put it in the barn, stripped all the tobacco, and finished one month before Christmas. Then we went to our master for our part he had promised us, but he said he wasn't going to give us any thing, and he stopped giving us any thing to eat, and said we couldn't live any longer on his land. Father went to an officer of the Freedmen's Bureau, but the officer was like Isaac said to Esau: "The voice is like Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." So that was the way with the officer—he had on Uncle Sam's clothes, but he had Uncle Jeff's [Jefferson Davis's] heart. He said our master said we wasn't worth any thing, and he couldn't get any thing for us, so father said no more about it.

We made out to live that winter—I don't know how. In April, 1866, father moved to town where he could work at his trade. He hired all of us boys that were large enough to work in a brick-yard for from three to six dollars a month. That was the first time I had tasted the sweet cup of freedom. . . .

B. The White Southern View of Slavery

I. William Harper's Apology (1837)

William Harper was a distinguished South Carolina jurist, an anti-tariff zealot, and a nullification advocate who early predicted civil war. He is perhaps best remembered as the author of the memorable ordinance of nullification voted by South Carolina in 1832 and also of the Memoir on Slavery. This remarkable apology, part of which is presented here, ranks as one of the most vigorous defenses of the "peculiar institution." In what respects did Harper's defense turn out to be an indictment? What was the weakness in the argument that cotton could not be grown without slaves?

Slavery was forced upon us by the extremest exigency of circumstances in a struggle for very existence. Without it, it is doubtful whether a white man would be now existing on this continent—certain that, if there were, they would be in a state of the utmost destitution, weakness, and misery. I neither deprecate nor resent the gift of slavery.

The Africans brought to us had been slaves in their own country and only underwent a change of masters.

¹Quoted in A. C. McLaughlin et al., eds., *Source Problems in United States History* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1918), pp. 419–424.

That there are great evils in a society where slavery exists, and that the institution is liable to great abuse, I have already said. But the whole of human life is a system of evils and compensations. The free laborer has few real guarantees from society, while security is one of the compensations of the slave's humble position.* There have been fewer murders of slaves than of parents, children, and apprentices in society where slavery does not exist. The slave offers no temptation to the murderer, nor does he really suffer injury from his master. Who but a driveling fanatic has thought of the necessity of protecting domestic animals from the cruelty of their owners?

. . . It is true that the slave is driven to labor by stripes [lashes]; and if the object of punishment be to produce obedience or reformation with the least permanent injury, it is the best method of punishment. Men claim that this is intolerable. It is not degrading to a slave, nor is it felt to be so. Is it degrading to a child?

Odium has been cast upon our legislation on account of its forbidding the elements of education to be communicated to slaves. But in truth what injury has been done them by this? He who works during the day with his hands does not read in intervals of leisure for his amusement or the improvement of his mind—or the exception is so rare as scarcely to need the being provided for. If there were any chance of elevating their rank, the denial of the rudiments of education might be a matter of hardship. But this they know cannot be and that further attainments would be useless to them. . . .

It has been said that marriage does not exist among our slaves. But we know that marriages among slaves are solemnized; but the law does not make them indissoluble, nor could it do so. . . . Some suppose that a slaveholding country is one wide stew [brothel] for the indulgence of unbridled lust, and there are particular instances of brutal and shameless debauches in every country. It is even true that in this respect the morals of this class [slave women] are very loose and that the passions of men of the superior caste tempt and find gratification in the easy chastity of the females. . . .

[In countries where free labor prevails] the unmarried woman who becomes a mother is an outcast from society—and though sentimentalists lament the hardship of the case, it is justly and necessarily so. But with us this female slave has a different status. She is not a less useful member of society than before. She has not impaired her means of support nor materially impaired her character or lowered her station in society; she has done no great injury to herself or any other human being. Her offspring is not a burden but an acquisition to her owner. . . .

Supposing finally that the abolitionists should effect their purpose. What would be the result? The first and most obvious effect would be to put an end to the cultivation of our great Southern staple [cotton]. . . . The cultivation of the great staple crops cannot be carried on in any portion of our own country where there are not slaves. . . . Even if it were possible to procure laborers at all, what planter would venture to carry on his operations? 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

*For the evils of "wage slavery," see p. 306.

crop. I need hardly say that these staples cannot be produced to any extent where the proprietor of the soil cultivates it with his own hands.

And what would be the effect of putting an end to the cultivation of these staples and thus annihilating, at a blow, two-thirds or three-fourths of our foreign commerce? Can any sane mind contemplate such a result without terror? Our slavery has not only given existence to millions of slaves within our own territories; it has given the means of subsistence, and therefore of existence, to millions of freemen in our Confederate [United] States, enabling them to send forth their swarms to overspread the plains and forests of the West and appear as the harbingers of civilization. Not only on our continent but on the other it has given existence [in textile mills] to hundreds of thousands and the means of comfortable subsistence to millions. A distinguished citizen of our state has lately stated that our great staple, cotton, has contributed more than anything else of later times to the progress of civilization. By enabling the poor to obtain cheap and becoming clothing, it has inspired a taste for comfort, the first stimulus to civilization.

2. The “Blessings” of the Slave (1849)

Connecticut-born and Puritan-descended Solon Robinson became a Yankee peddler at eighteen. After he moved to Indiana, he attained prominence as a trader and agriculturist. During the course of his extensive travels through practically every state, he wrote a series of discerning sketches for the foremost agricultural magazines. The following contribution to a leading southern trade journal is hardly what one would expect from a Connecticut Yankee. In what respects did Robinson appear to be too soft on slavery, and in what respects did he disagree with the abolitionists?

A greater punishment could not be devised or inflicted upon the Southern slave at this day than to give him that liberty which God in his wisdom and mercy deprived him of. . . .

Free them from control, and how soon does poverty and wretchedness overtake them! . . . I boldly and truly assert that you may travel Europe over—yea, you may visit the boasted freemen of America—aye, you may search the world over—before you find a laboring peasantry who are more happy, more contented, as a class of people, or who are better clothed and fed and better provided for in sickness, infirmity, and old age, or who enjoy more of the essential comforts of life, than these so-called miserable, oppressed, abused, starved slaves. . . .

I doubt whether one single instance can be found among the slaves of the South where one has injured himself at long and excessive labor. Instead of a cruel and avaricious master being able to extort more than a very reasonable amount of labor from him, his efforts will certainly produce the contrary effect. This is a well-known fact, so much so indeed that an overseer of this character cannot get employment among masters, who know that over-driving a Negro, as well as a mule, is the poorest way to get work out of either of them. These facts are well understood

²*De Bow's Review*, vol. 7 (n.s., vol. 1, 1849), pp. 217–221, 383–384.

by all observant masters and overseers: that neither mule nor Negro can be made to do more than a certain amount of work; and that amount so small in comparison to the amount done by white laborers at the North that it is a universal observation at the South. Northern men are always the hardest masters, in the vain attempt they make to force the Negro to do even half as much as a hireling in New England is compelled to do, or lose his place and wages. . . .

It is true that some men abuse and harshly treat their slaves. So do some men abuse their wives and children and apprentices and horses and cattle. . . .

The fact is notorious that slaves are better treated now than formerly, and that the improvement in their condition is progressing; partly from their masters becoming more temperate and better men, but mainly from the greatest of all moving causes in human actions—self-interest. For masters have discovered in the best of all schools—experience—that their true interest is inseparably bound up with the humane treatment, comfort, and happiness of their slaves.

And many masters have discovered, too, that their slaves are more temperate, more industrious, more kind to one another, more cheerful, more faithful, and more obedient under the ameliorating influences of religion than under all the driving and whipping of all the tyrannical taskmasters that have existed since the day when the children of Israel were driven to the task of making Egyptian brick without straw.

And I do most fearlessly assert, and defy contradiction, that in no part of this Union, even in Puritan New England, is the Sabbath better kept by master and slave, by employer and hireling, or by all classes, high and low, rich and poor, than in the state of Mississippi, where I have often been told that that thing so accursed of God [slavery] existed in all its most disgusting deformity, wretchedness, and sinful horror. From the small plantations, the slaves go more regularly, and better dressed and behaved, to church, often a distance of five or six miles, than any other class of laborers that I have ever been acquainted with. Upon many of the large plantations, divine service is performed more regularly, and to larger and more orderly audiences, than in some county towns. . . .

In all my tour during the past winter, I did not see or hear of but two cases of flogging: one of which was for stealing, and the other for running away from as good a master as ever a servant need to have, which is proved by the appearance and general good conduct of his Negroes. And that they are well fed I know from many days' personal observation; and I have seen some of them with better broad-cloth suits on than I often wear myself; and more spare money than their master, as he will freely acknowledge. . . .

But I do seriously say that I did not see or hear of one place where the Negroes were not well fed; and I did not see a ragged gang of Negroes in the South. And I could only hear of one plantation where the Negroes were overworked or unjustly flogged, and on that plantation the master was a drunken, abusive wretch, as heartily despised by his neighbors as he was hated by his Negroes. And were it not for the consequences to themselves if they should rise upon and pull him limb from limb, his brother planters would rejoice that he had met the fate that cruelty to slaves, they are free to say, justly merits.

The two things that are most despised and hated in the South are masters that abuse and starve and ill-treat their slaves, and abolitionists, who seize upon every

isolated case of the kind, and trumpet it through the land as evidence of the manner that all slaves are treated, and then call upon the people of the free states to aid the Negroes to free themselves from such inhuman bondage, peaceably if they can, forcibly if they must, no matter whose or how much blood shall flow.

3. Slaves Don't Strike (1846)

The South invested its capital in human muscle, not machinery; in the lash system, not the cash system. The slaveowners had one ace-in-the-hole argument against emancipation: it would wipe out that reliable supply of labor without which southern agriculture (and northern textile factories) would perish. These fears were not groundless, as the economic chaos that followed the Civil War amply demonstrated. Sir Charles Lyell, the distinguished British geologist and world traveler, was exposed to the southern viewpoint. How does he explain the fact that the South clung to slavery while white day labor was admittedly cheaper?

An intelligent Louisianian said to me, "Were we to emancipate our Negroes as suddenly as your government did the West Indians, they would be a doomed race. But there can be no doubt that white labor is more profitable even in this climate."

"Then, why do you not encourage it?" I asked.

"It must be the work of time," he replied. "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 labor, 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 \$10,000."

4. Comparing Slave Labor and Wage Labor (1850)

In response to abolitionist attacks in the 1840s, supporters of slavery became more aggressive. Instead of simply defending the "peculiar institution," they began to argue that slavery benefited slaveowners and slaves alike. Proslavery propagandists frequently compared northern and southern institutions in the light of this argument. This cartoon published in Boston is an example of such a comparison. Why would an attack on conditions in England be an effective way to respond to criticism of slavery in America? Were there advantages of slave labor, and if so, to whom did they accrue? In what sense was wage labor really "free"?

³Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers: London: J. Murray, 1849), vol. 2, pp. 126–127.

⁴Library of Congress, #USZ62-1285.

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SLAVERY AS IT EXISTS IN ENGLAND

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C. The Abolitionist Crusade

I. William Lloyd Garrison Launches The Liberator (1831)

Mild-appearing William Lloyd Garrison, the most impassioned of the abolitionists, began publication of his incendiary weekly newspaper, The Liberator, with the following trumpet blast. Despite a subscription list of not more than three thousand and embarrassing annual deficits, he continued the journal for thirty-five years—until slavery was legally ended. The rude woodcut at the top of the front page showing a slave auction near the Capitol infuriated the South; the state of Georgia offered \$5,000 for Garrison's arrest and conviction. Jailed in Baltimore for libel, mobbed in Boston, and jeered at while on the lecture platform, he not only outraged the South but also angered northern conservatives and even moderate abolitionists. What specific measures did he advocate? Did he address his appeal exclusively to the South? Has posterity vindicated him, as he claimed it would?

During my recent tour for the purpose of exciting the minds of the people by a series of discourses on the subject of slavery, every place that I visited gave fresh evidence of the fact that a greater revolution in public sentiment was to be effected in the free states—and particularly in New England—than at the South. I found contempt more bitter, opposition more active, detraction more relentless, prejudice more stubborn, and apathy more frozen, than among slaveowners themselves. Of course, there were individual exceptions to the contrary.

This state of things afflicted but did not dishearten me. I determined, at every hazard, to lift up the standard of emancipation in the eyes of the nation, *within sight of Bunker Hill and in the birthplace of liberty*. That standard is now unfurled; and long may it float, unhurt by the spoliations of time or the missiles of a desperate foe—yea, till every chain be broken, and every bondman set free! Let Southern oppressors tremble—let their secret abettors tremble—let their Northern apologists tremble—let all the enemies of the persecuted blacks tremble. . . .

Assenting to the “self-evident truth” maintained in the American Declaration of Independence “that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights—among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population. . . . In Park Street Church [in Boston], on the Fourth of July, 1829, in an address on slavery, I unreflectingly assented to the popular but pernicious doctrine of *gradual* abolition. I seize this opportunity to make a full and unequivocal recantation, and thus publicly to ask pardon of my God, of my country, and of my brethren the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice, and absurdity. . . .

I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I *will be* as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On

¹*The Liberator* (Boston), January 1, 1831.

this subject I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.

It is pretended that I am retarding the cause of emancipation by the coarseness of my invective and the precipitancy of my measures. *The charge is not true.* On this question my influence—humble as it is—is felt at this moment to a considerable extent, and shall be felt in coming years—not perniciously, but beneficially—not as a curse, but as a blessing. And posterity will bear testimony that I was right.

2. Manifesto of the Anti-Slavery Society (1833)

About fifty abolitionist idealists, meeting in Philadelphia, launched the American Anti-Slavery Society with the following declaration. Garrison, who would be its president twenty-two times, was chief architect of this manifesto. Later becoming more insistent and impatient, he denounced the churches as “cages of unclean birds” (because they tolerated slavery), denied the full inspiration of the Bible (because it sanctioned slavery), publicly burned a copy of the Constitution (because it upheld slavery), and as early as 1841 advocated the disruption of the Union (because it legalized slavery). The following is an edict by the American Anti-Slavery Society. Why does it demand immediate and uncompensated emancipation? What concessions does it make at this early date to the South? Which of its proposals were most (and least) politically feasible?

We further maintain that no man has a right to enslave or imbrute his brother—to hold or acknowledge him, for one moment, as a piece of merchandise—to keep back his hire by fraud—or to brutalize his mind by denying him the means of intellectual, social, and moral improvement.

The right to enjoy liberty is inalienable. To invade it is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah. Every man has a right to his own body—to the products of his own labor—to the protection of law—and to the common advantages of society. It is piracy to buy or steal a native African and subject him to servitude. Surely, the sin is as great to enslave an American as an African.

Therefore we believe and affirm that there is no difference, in principle, between the African slave trade and American slavery;

That every American citizen who retains a human being in involuntary bondage as his property is, according to Scripture (Exodus 21:16), a manstealer;

²W. P. Garrison and F. J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805–1879* (New York: The Century Co., 1885), vol. 1, pp. 410–411.

That the slaves ought instantly to be set free and brought under the protection of law; . . .

That all those laws which are now in force admitting the right of slavery are therefore, before God, utterly null and void. . . .

We further believe and affirm that all persons of color who possess the qualifications which are demanded of others ought to be admitted forthwith to the enjoyment of the same privileges, and the exercise of the same prerogatives, as others; and that the paths of preferment, of wealth, and of intelligence should be opened as widely to them as to persons of a white complexion.

We maintain that no compensation should be given to the planters emancipating their slaves:

Because it would be a surrender of the great fundamental principle that man cannot hold property in man;

Because slavery is a crime, and therefore [the slave] is not an article to be sold;

Because the holders of slaves are not the just proprietors of what they claim; freeing the slave is not depriving them of property, but restoring it to its rightful owner; it is not wronging the master, but righting the slave—restoring him to himself;

Because immediate and general emancipation would only destroy nominal, not real, property; it would not amputate a limb or break a bone of the slaves, but, by infusing motives into their breasts, would make them doubly valuable to the masters as free laborers; and

Because, if compensation is to be given at all, it should be given to the outraged and guiltless slaves, and not to those who have plundered and abused them.

We regard as delusive, cruel, and dangerous any scheme of expatriation [to Liberia] which pretends to aid, either directly or indirectly, in the emancipation of the slaves, or to be a substitute for the immediate and total abolition of slavery.

We fully and unanimously recognize the sovereignty of each state to legislate exclusively on the subject of the slavery which is tolerated within its limits; we concede that Congress, under the present national compact, has no right to interfere with any of the slave states in relation to this momentous subject;

But we maintain that Congress has a right, and is solemnly bound, to suppress the domestic trade between the several states, and to abolish slavery in those portions of our territory which the Constitution has placed under its exclusive jurisdiction [District of Columbia].

3. Theodore Dwight Weld Pillories Slavery (1839)

Theodore Dwight Weld assumed leadership of the New York abolitionist group, which objected to the anticonstitutional tactics of Garrison's New England following. He was one of the most influential of the abolitionists, and certainly one of the great men of his era. Preacher, lecturer (until he ruined his voice), pamphleteer, organ-

³T. D. Weld, *American Slavery As It Is* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), p. 9.

izer, and inspirational genius, he founded numerous local abolitionist societies and won countless converts to abolition, including congressmen and other public figures. His documented compilation of horror tales, published in 1839 in American Slavery As It Is, not only became the bible of the cause but greatly influenced the writing of Uncle Tom's Cabin. The following statements in his Introduction have been criticized as grossly overdrawn. How exaggerated or accurate are they?

We will prove that the slaves in the United States are treated with barbarous inhumanity; that they are overworked, underfed, wretchedly clad and lodged, and have insufficient sleep; that they are often made to wear round their necks iron collars armed with prongs, to drag heavy chains and weights at their feet while working in the field, and to wear yokes, and bells, and iron horns; that they are often kept confined in the stocks day and night for weeks together, made to wear gags in their mouths for hours or days, have some of their front teeth torn out or broken off, that they may be easily detected when they run away; that they are frequently flogged with terrible severity, have red pepper rubbed into their lacerated flesh, and hot brine, spirits of turpentine, etc., poured over the gashes to increase the torture; that they are often stripped naked, their backs and limbs cut with knives, bruised and mangled by scores and hundreds of blows with the paddle, and terribly torn by the claws of cats, drawn over them by their tormentors; that they are often hunted with bloodhounds and shot down like beasts, or torn in pieces by dogs; that they are often suspended by the arms and whipped and beaten till they faint, and when revived by restoratives beaten again till they faint, and sometimes till they die; that their ears are often cut off, their eyes knocked out, their bones broken, their flesh branded with red-hot irons; that they are maimed, mutilated, and burned to death over slow fires.

All these things, and more, and worse, we shall prove. . . . We shall show, not merely that such deeds are committed, but that they are frequent; not done in corners, but before the sun; not in one of the slave states, but in all of them; not perpetrated by brutal overseers and drivers merely, but by magistrates, by legislators, by professors of religion, by preachers of the Gospel, by governors of states, by "gentlemen of property and standing," and by delicate females moving in the "highest circles of society."

We know, full well, the outcry that will be made by multitudes at these declarations; the multiform cavils, the flat denials, the charges of "exaggeration" and "falseness" so often bandied; the sneers of affected contempt at the credulity that can believe such things; and the rage and imprecations against those who give them currency.

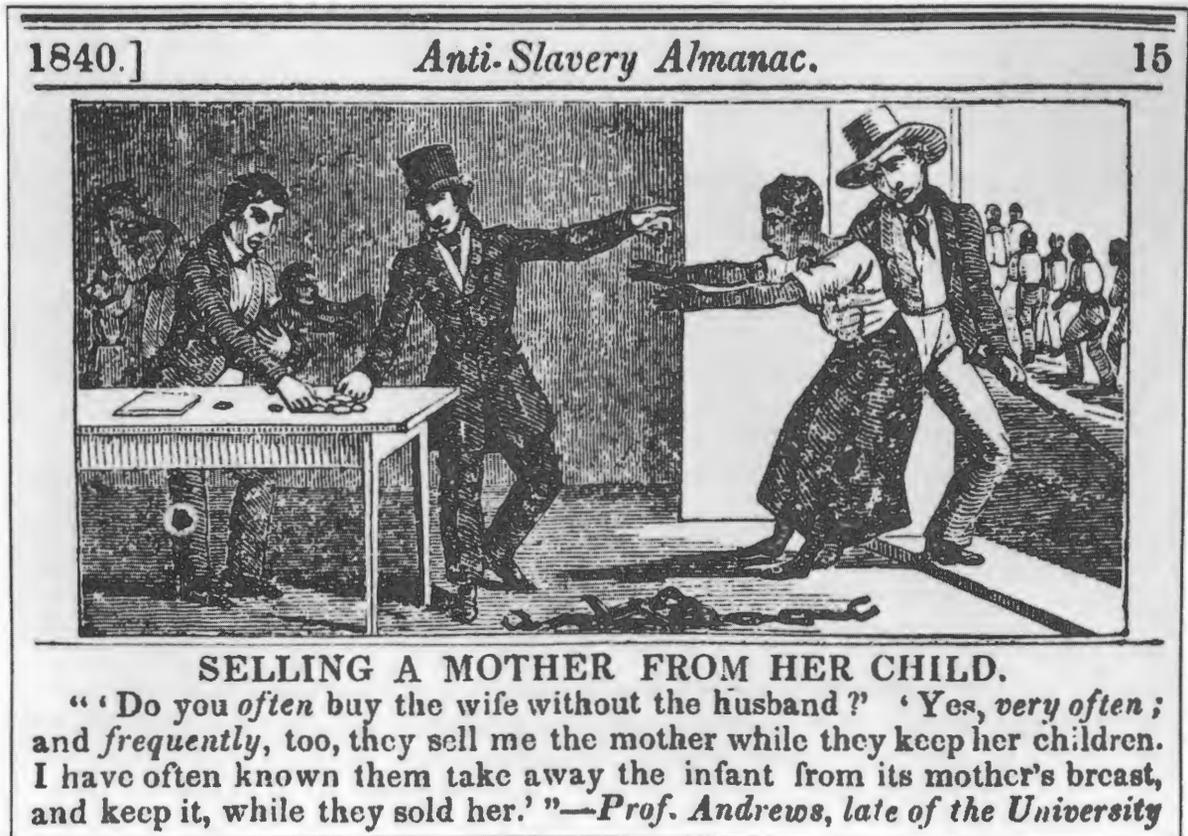
We know, too, the threadbare sophistries by which slaveholders and their apologists seek to evade such testimony. If they admit that such deeds are committed, they tell us that they are exceedingly rare, and therefore furnish no grounds for judging of the general treatment of slaves; that occasionally a brutal wretch in the free states barbarously butchers his wife, but that no one thinks of inferring from that the general treatment of wives at the North and West.

They tell us, also, that the slaveholders of the South are proverbially hospitable, kind, and generous, and it is incredible that they can perpetrate such enormities upon human beings; further, that it is absurd to suppose that they would thus injure

their own property, that self-interest would prompt them to treat their slaves with kindness, as none but fools and madmen wantonly destroy their own property; further, that Northern visitors at the South come back testifying to the kind treatment of the slaves, and that the slaves themselves corroborate such representations. . . . We are not to be turned from our purpose by such vapid babblings.

4. Slavery and the Family (1840)

This illustration depicts what was probably the abolitionists' most telling argument against slavery: the violence it wrought upon the integrity of family life. Harriet Beecher Stowe would later make that argument the central motif of her epochal antislavery novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. Why was this argument so powerful? Did it appeal differently to men and women? How did the illustrator here make special appeal to women's sentiments?



⁴*Anti-Slavery Almanac*, 1840.

D. Judgments on the Abolitionists

I. Daniel Webster Is Critical (1850)

The thunderously eloquent Daniel Webster was no abolitionist, though the abolitionists liked to think of him as in their camp. He sadly disillusioned them in his famous Seventh of March speech about the Compromise of 1850 (see later, p. 405). Pleading passionately for North-South harmony, he turned upon the antislaveryites. Their pained outcry rent the heavens. At a public meeting in Faneuil Hall in Boston, the Reverend Theodore Parker declared, "I know of no deed in American history done by a son of New England to which I can compare this but the act of Benedict Arnold." In this portion of Webster's speech, is he convincing about the harm done by the abolitionists?

Then, sir, there are those abolition societies, of which I am unwilling to speak, but in regard to which I have very clear notions and opinions. I do not think them useful. I think their operations for the last twenty years have produced nothing good or valuable.

At the same time, I know thousands of them are honest and good men; perfectly well-meaning men. They have excited feelings; they think they must do something for the cause of liberty. And in their sphere of action, they do not see what else they can do than to contribute to an abolition press, or an abolition society, or to pay an abolition lecturer.

I do not mean to impute gross motives even to the leaders of these societies, but I am not blind to the consequences. I cannot but see what mischiefs their interference with the South has produced.

And is it not plain to every man? Let any gentleman who doubts of that recur to the debates in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1832, and he will see with what freedom a proposition made by Mr. Randolph for the gradual abolition of slavery was discussed in that body. Everyone spoke of slavery as he thought; very ignominious and disparaging names and epithets were applied to it.

The debates in the House of Delegates on that occasion, I believe, were all published. They were read by every colored man who could read, and if there were any who could not read, those debates were read to them by others. At that time Virginia was not unwilling nor afraid to discuss this question, and to let that part of her population know as much of it as they could learn.

That was in 1832. . . . These abolition societies commenced their course of action in 1835. It is said—I do not know how true it may be—that they sent incendiary publications into the slave states. At any event, they attempted to arouse, and did arouse, a very strong feeling. In other words, they created great agitation in the North against Southern slavery.

Well, what was the result? The bonds of the slaves were bound more firmly than before; their rivets were more strongly fastened. Public opinion, which in Virginia had begun to be exhibited against slavery, and was opening out for the discussion of the question, drew back and shut itself up in its castle.

¹*Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st session, Appendix, vol. 22, part 1, p. 275.

I wish to know whether anybody in Virginia can, now, talk openly as Mr. Randolph, Gov. McDowell, and others talked there, openly, and sent their remarks to the press, in 1832.

We all know the fact, and we all know the cause. And everything that this agitating people have done, has been, not to enlarge, but to restrain, not to set free, but to bind faster, the slave population of the South. That is my judgment.

2. Abraham Lincoln Appraises Abolitionism (1854)

Abolitionism and crackpotism were, for a time, closely associated in the public mind, and the taint of abolitionism was almost fatal to a man aspiring to public office. Southerners commonly regarded Abraham Lincoln as an abolitionist, even though his wife's family in Kentucky were slaveholders. Lincoln set forth his views at some length in this memorable speech at Peoria, Illinois, in 1854. On the basis of these remarks, did he deserve to be called an abolitionist? In what respects might the South have resented his position?

Before proceeding, let me say that I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses North and South.

Doubtless there are individuals, on both sides, who would not hold slaves under any circumstances, and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence. We know that some Southern men do free their slaves, go North, and become tiptop abolitionists; while some Northern ones go South and become most cruel slave-masters.

When Southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery than we, I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists, and that it is very difficult to get rid of it in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.

If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia—to their native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me that whatever of high hope (as I think there is) there may be in this in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible. If they all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days; and there are not surplus shipping and surplus money enough to carry them there in many times ten days.

What then? Free them all and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery at any rate; yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon.

What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of

²R. P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 2, pp. 255–256.

the great mass of white people would not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment is not the sole question, if indeed it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We cannot then make them equals.

It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the South.

When they remind us of their constitutional rights, I acknowledge them, not grudgingly but fully and fairly. And I would give them any legislation for the reclaiming of their fugitives which should not, in its stringency, be more likely to carry a free man into slavery than our ordinary criminal laws are to hang an innocent one.

3. The Abolitionists Provoke War (1882)

The abolitionists were often accused of having precipitated the Civil War. In his memoirs Frederick Douglass, the remarkable ex-slave and abolitionist agitator, pleads partly guilty to the indictment. How correct was his assumption as to who were the aggressors?

The abolitionists of this country have been charged with bringing on the war between the North and South, and in one sense this is true. Had there been no anti-slavery agitation at the North, there would have been no active anti-slavery anywhere to resist the demands of the Slave Power at the South, and where there is no resistance there can be no war. Slavery would then have been nationalized, and the whole country would then have been subjected to its power. Resistance to slavery and the extension of slavery invited and provoked secession and war to perpetuate and extend the slave system.

Thus, in the same sense, England is responsible for our Civil War. The abolition of slavery in the West Indies gave life and vigor to the abolition movement in America. Clarkson of England gave us Garrison of America; Granville Sharp of England gave us our Wendell Phillips; and Wilberforce of England gave us our peerless Charles Sumner.*

These grand men and their brave co-workers here took up the moral thunderbolts which had struck down slavery in the West Indies, and hurled them with increased zeal and power against the gigantic system of slavery here, till, goaded to madness, the traffickers in the souls and bodies of men flew to arms, rent asunder the Union at the center, and filled the land with hostile armies and the ten thousand horrors of war. Out of this tempest, out of this whirlwind and earthquake of war, came the abolition of slavery, came the employment of colored troops, came colored citizens, came colored jurymen, came colored Congressmen, came colored schools in the South, and came the great amendments of our national Constitution.

⁵*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn.: Park, 1882), p. 607.

*Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), Granville Sharp (1735–1813), and William Wilberforce (1759–1833) were English abolitionists whose efforts persuaded Parliament to end the slave trade within the British Empire in 1807. William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), Wendell Phillips (1811–1884), and Charles Sumner (1811–1874) were leading American abolitionists—all of them, interestingly, from Massachusetts.

E. The Rising White Southern Temper

I. Hinton Helper's Banned Book (1857)

*Hinton R. Helper, an impoverished North Carolinian who hated blacks, published a sensational book in 1857 in which he statistically contrasted the rapid economic growth of the North with the slower progress of the South. Concluding that the slaveless whites were the chief victims of the slave system, he urged upon them various means, some incendiary, to overthrow both slavery and the grip of the white oligarchy. Unable to find a publisher in the South, he aired his views in the North under the title *The Impending Crisis of the South*. The southern aristocracy reacted violently, banning the book and roughly handling a few daring souls who had obtained smuggled copies. Tens of thousands of copies in one form or another were distributed. Why was it to the advantage of the slaveowners to treat the poor whites as Helper alleged they did?*

Notwithstanding the fact that the white non-slaveholders of the South are in the majority as five to one, they have never yet had any part or lot in framing the laws under which they live. There is no legislation except for the benefit of slavery and slaveholders.

As a general rule, poor white persons are regarded with less esteem and attention than Negroes, and though the condition of the latter is wretched beyond description, vast numbers of the former are infinitely worse off. A cunningly devised mockery of freedom is guaranteed to them, and that is all. To all intents and purposes, they are disfranchised and outlawed, and the only privilege extended to them is a shallow and circumscribed participation in the political movements that usher slaveholders into office.

We have not breathed away seven and twenty years in the South without becoming acquainted with the demagogical maneuverings of the oligarchy. . . . To the illiterate poor whites—made poor and ignorant by the system of slavery—they hold out the idea that slavery is the very bulwark of our liberties, and the foundation of American independence! . . .

The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks, who are bought and sold, and driven about like so many cattle, but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated. How little the “poor white trash”—the great majority of the Southern people—know of the real condition of the country is, indeed, sadly astonishing.

The truth is they know nothing of public measures, and little of private affairs, except what their imperious masters, the slave-drivers, condescend to tell—and that is but precious little. And even that little, always garbled and one-sided, is never told except in public harangues. For the haughty cavaliers of shackles and handcuffs will not degrade themselves by holding private converse with those who have neither dimes nor hereditary rights in human flesh.

¹H. R. Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South* (New York: A. C. Bundick, 1860), pp. 42–45.

Whenever it pleases . . . a slaveholder to become communicative, poor whites may hear with fear and trembling, but not speak.

Non-slaveholders are not only kept in ignorance of what is transpiring at the North, but they are continually misinformed of what is going on even in the South. Never were the poorer classes of a people, and those classes so largely in the majority, and all inhabiting the same country, so basely duped, so adroitly swindled, or so damnably outraged.

It is expected that the stupid and sequacious [servile] masses, the white victims of slavery, will believe—and, as a general thing, they do believe—whatever the slaveholders tell them. And thus it is that they are cajoled into the notion that they are the freest, happiest, and most intelligent people in the world, and are taught to look with prejudice and disapprobation upon every new principle or progressive movement. Thus it is that the South, woefully inert and inventionless, has lagged behind the North, and is now weltering in the cesspool of ignorance and degradation.

2. *The South Condemns Helperites (1859)*

Helper's appeal to the poor whites of the South fell on barren ground; most of them were illiterate or apathetic, while others could not get the book. But the free-soil Republicans of the North seized upon it for political purposes, and sixty-eight members of the House of Representatives signed an appeal for funds to distribute free 100,000 copies of a paperback abridgment. Following John Brown's fear-inspiring raid into Virginia in 1859, the southerners were determined to keep from the Speakership of the House any endorser of Helper's book. For two months they filibustered successfully against Republican John Sherman, who had ill-advisedly signed the appeal, while the flames of sectional conflict roared higher and higher. What does the following speech by Representative James Bullock Clark of Missouri (later a member of the Confederate Congress) presage about the preservation of the Union?

These [Helperite] gentlemen come in and say that the riches of the South are neglected by the bad management of the South; that the accursed plague of slavery does it; and that, therefore, non-slaveholders at the South should rise in their majesty—peaceably if they can, forcibly if they must—take their arms, subdue the slaveholders, drive out the plague of slavery, take possession of the country, and dedicate it to free labor.

That is the sentiment in the book which these gentlemen recommend to have circulated gratuitously all over the South. Are such men fit to preside over the destinies of our common country? Can the South expect from such men the maintenance of the integrity of the Constitution? Our slave property is as much our property under the Constitution, and under the guarantees of this government, as any property held at the North. Whether it is sinful to hold slaves, whether slavery is a plague and a loss, and whether it will affect our future destiny, is our own business. We suffer for that, and not they.

²*Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 1st session (December 8, 1859), p. 17.

We ask none of their prayers. We need none of them. If we were in need of them, and if the only way to escape future punishment and misery were to receive benefit from the prayers of those [sixty-eight] who signed that recommendation, I should expect, after death, to sink into the nethermost Hell. [Laughter.]

Do gentlemen expect that they can distribute incendiary books, give incendiary advice, advise rebellion, advise non-intercourse in all the relations of life, spread such works broadcast over the country, and not be taken to task for it? I presume that the South has sufficient self-respect; that it understands the effect of its institutions well enough; that it has its rights, and dares to maintain them.

3. James Hammond Proclaims Cotton King (1858)

As the resentment of the South rose, so did its confidence in its ability to stand alone as a Confederacy, if need be. It rode through the panic of 1857 with flying colors; its enormous exports of "King Cotton" overshadowed all others from America. But the North might well have responded with the cry "Grass is King!" For, as Helper pointed out in his banned book, the value of the North's hay crop, though consumed at home, was greater than that of the South's cotton crop. Yet Senator Hammond of South Carolina, a bombastic owner of some three hundred slaves, voiced the cry "Cotton is King!" in this famous Senate speech. He referred to the dangerous dependence of the enormous English textile industry on the huge imports from the South. What were the problems with his argument?

Why, sir, the South has never yet had a just cause of war. Every time she has seized her sword it has been on the point of honor, and that point of honor has been mainly loyalty to her sister colonies and sister states, who have ever since plundered and calumniated her.

But if there were no other reason why we should never have a war, would any sane nation make war on cotton? Without firing a gun, without drawing a sword, when they make war on us we can bring the whole world to our feet.

The South is perfectly competent to go on, one, two, or three years, without planting a seed of cotton. I believe that if she was to plant but half her cotton, it would be an immediate advantage to her. I am not so sure but that after three years' cessation she would come out stronger than ever she was before and better prepared to enter afresh upon her great career of enterprise.

What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? I will not stop to depict what everyone can imagine, but this is certain: old England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her. No, sir, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares make war upon it. Cotton is King!

[It is not surprising that cotton should have deluded the South when the British themselves conceded their fatal dependence. A writer in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (February 1851, p. 216) confessed: "We rest almost entirely on the supplies obtained from a single state [nation]. No one need be told that five-sixths, often nine-tenths, of the supply of cotton consumed in our manufactures come from America,

³*Congressional Globe*. 35th Congress, 1st session (March 3, 1858), p. 961.

and that seven or eight thousand persons are directly or indirectly employed in the operations which take place upon it. Suppose America wishes to bully us, to make us abandon Canada or Jamaica for example, she has no need to go to war. She has only to stop the export of cotton for six months, and the whole of our manufacturing counties are starving or in rebellion; while a temporary cessation of profit is the only inconvenience they experience on the other side of the Atlantic. Can we call ourselves independent in such circumstances?"]

Thought Provokers

1. A favorite argument of the South was that the black slave was better off than the wage slave of the North or England. (See also earlier, p. 306.) In what respects was this true? false? John Quincy Adams said, "Misery is not slavery." Comment.
2. Why could persons who had eyewitnessed slavery in the South offer such radically differing accounts? What would have been the future of slavery if it had been left alone?
3. It has been said that the Garrison abolitionists were right in principle but wrong in method. Comment. Garrison advocated disunion as a means of ending slavery. Explain the logic or illogic of his position. Explain how you would have dealt with slavery if given "all earthly power."
4. Why did so many people in the North deplore the boat-rocking tactics of the abolitionists and often despise them? Did the abolitionists do more harm or good?
5. In what respects did Hinton R. Helper help to cause the Civil War? In what respects did the "Cotton is King" complex cause the Civil War? It has been said that cotton was a king who enslaved his subjects. Comment.