

The Factory v. the Plantation: Northern and Southern Economies on the Eve of the Civil War

An Online Professional Development Seminar

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from the National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik ckoplik@nationalhumanitiescenter.org for assistance.

GOALS

- To deepen understanding of the economic differences between the North and the South that contributed to the Civil War
- To provide fresh primary resources and instructional approaches for use with students

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How did slave labor compare with free labor in terms of cost of production, profitability, and working conditions?
- Did “good” treatment increase the productivity of slave labor? Did “bad” treatment lessen it?
- How did families fare under slavery and under conditions of free labor?

See “How Slavery Affected African American Families” by Heather Williams in *Freedom’s Story* from the National Humanities Center

- To what extent did Northern factories depend on Southern plantations for their economic success and stability?

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- Why did the North permit slavery to continue in the South as long as it did?
- Would slavery have survived had the country managed to avoid the Civil War?
- How did the plantation economy work?
- How did economic issues influence the coming of the Civil War?
- How did economics influence Northern attitudes toward the South and slavery?

Framing Questions

- How similar/different were the Northern and Southern economies on the eve of the Civil War?
- Were the North and the South two distinct economies, societies, even civilizations?
- How did their differences come about?
- Given the industrial might of the North, did the South stand a chance of winning?

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*The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death
in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670-1920*
1989

*The South, the Nation, and the World: Perspectives
on Southern Economic Development (with David L.
Carlton)*
2003

“The Economics of Slavery,” in *The Oxford
Handbook of Slavery in the Americas*
2010

Roots of the Economic Differences Between the North and the South

- Differences go back to the 1600s, when the formalization of racial slavery, the production of tobacco as a staple crop, and the rise of the plantation class took the South down an economic path never followed in the North.
- Climate, profit possibilities, natural resources dictated this path.
- Once the pattern was locked in, the South's economy went down one path, the North's another.
- In the South capital and entrepreneurial energy followed a path that generally led to the plantation complex.
- By the 1770s plantations dominated the Southern economy. Its course was irreversibly set. It would be a slave-based economy, dependent upon the export of agricultural staples—tobacco, rice, cotton—to the North and Europe.

The Factory v. the Plantation

Southern Economy, circa 1800 Chesapeake and the Lower South

- Capitalist in structure, institutions, and values
- Income and wealth levels high
- Narrowly dispersed prosperity
- Valuable export staples: sugar, tobacco, and rice
- Many agricultural slaves
- Stable development
- Broad-based large-scale agricultural export economy
- Little population diversity
- Widely dispersed local markets
- Little public access to social, educational, public, and cultural institutions

Northern Economy, circa 1800 New England and the Middle Colonies

- Capitalist in structure, institutions, and values
- Income and wealth levels high
- Broadly dispersed prosperity
- No important export staples as valuable as sugar, tobacco, and rice
- Few agricultural slaves
- Improvised development, constant change
- Balanced, diverse regional economies: agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, forest industries, fishing, shipping, commerce, financial services
- Great population diversity
- Relatively integrated local markets
- Broad public access to social, educational, political, and cultural institutions

Southern Economy, 1800-1860 **Chesapeake, Lower South, Southern Interior**

- Persistence of agricultural export economy
- Sought growth through indefinite expansion of the plantation system and slavery
- “Networked” largely for the movement of goods
- Transferred labor and capital plus marketing and transportation infrastructure to Southern interior
- By 1860 some industrial capacity
- By 1860 under 10% of population lived in cities
- By 1860, very wealthy; equal to third or fourth largest economy in the world

Northern Economy, 1800-60 **New England, Middle Colonies, Upper Midwest**

- Growth of business/industrial culture
- Embraced technological, economic, organizational changes associated with the Industrial Revolution; laid groundwork for a modern industrial society
- “Networked” for the movement of goods and the sharing of capital, information, and innovation
- Incorporated upper Midwest into business/industrial culture
- By 1860 substantial industrial capacity
- By 1860 over one-third of population lived in cities
- By 1860, very wealthy; first or second largest economy in the world

Even with economic differences, in 1860 both the North and the South

- were predominantly English speaking
- populated largely by Protestants
- lived under the same government
- venerated the same Constitution
- shared the same individual rights, privileges, and immunities
- shared a common past
- for the most part, shared common civic values

The Factory v. the Plantation

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903)

Farmer

Journalist

Social critic

Public administrator

Landscape designer

—with Calvert Vaux, architect of
Central Park in New York City

- Three journeys throughout the South between 1852 and 1854 to study “the ordinary condition of the laborers of the South, with respect to material comfort and moral and intellectual happiness.”
- Sent dispatches back to New York newspapers
- Gathered and expanded the dispatches into three separate books, which he assembled into *The Cotton Kingdom*, published in 1861.



Take men of any original character of mind, and use them as mere animal machines, to be operated only by the motive—power of fear; provide for the necessities of their animal life in such a way that the cravings of their body shall afford no stimulus to contrivance, labor, and providence; work them mechanically, under a task-master, so that they shall have no occasion to use discretion, except to avoid the imperatives of additional labor, or other punishment; deny them as much as possible, the means of enlarged information, and high mental culture—and what can be expected of them, but continued, if not continually increasing stupidity, indolence, wastefulness, and treachery?

Discussion Question

Is this an accurate depiction of the actual effects of slavery on the enslaved or of the tendencies inherent in *any* highly coercive labor system—whether slave or free?

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The rice is neatly stacked, much as wheat is in Scotland, in round, thatched stacks. Threshing commences immediately after harvest, and on many plantations proceeds very tediously, in the old way of threshing wheat, with flails, by hand, occupying the best of the plantation force for the most of the winter.... But on most large plantations, threshing-machines, much the same as are used with us, driven either by horse-power or by steam-power, have been lately adopted, of course, with great economy. Where horse-power is used for threshing, the wind is still often relied upon for removing the chaff, as of old; but where steam-engines are employed, there are often connected with the threshing-mill, very complete separators and fanners, together with elevators and other labor-saving machinery, some of it the best for such purposes that I have ever seen.

A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, 1856

I am not aware that any application of the reaping-machines, now in use on every large grain farm at the North, has been made in the rice harvest. By the use of a portable tram-way for them to run upon, I should think they might be substituted for the present exceedingly slow and toilsome method of reaping with the sickle, with economy and great relief to the laborers.

A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, 1856

On the rice plantation which I have particularly described, the slaves were, I judge, treated with at least as much discretion and judicious consideration of economy, consistently with humane regard to their health, comfort, and morals, as on any other in all the Slave States; yet I could not avoid observing—and I certainly took no pains to do so, nor were any special facilities offered me for it—repeated instances of that wasteland misapplication of labor which it can never be possible to guard against, when the agents of industry are slaves...

.....gates left open and bars left down, against standing orders; rails removed from fences by the negroes, as was conjectured, to kindle their fires with; mules lamed, and implements broken, by careless usage; a flatboat, carelessly secured, going adrift on the river; men ordered to cart rails for a new fence, depositing them so that a double expense of labor would be required to lay them, more than would have been needed if they had been placed, as they might almost as easily have been, by a slight exercise of forethought; men, ordered to fill up holes made by alligators or craw-fish in an important embankment, discovered to have merely patched over the outside, having taken pains only to make it appear that they had executed their task—not having been overlooked while doing it, by a driver; men, not having performed duties that were entrusted to them, making statements which their owner was obliged to receive as sufficient excuse, though, he told me, he felt assured they were false—all going to show habitual carelessness, indolence, and mere eye-service.

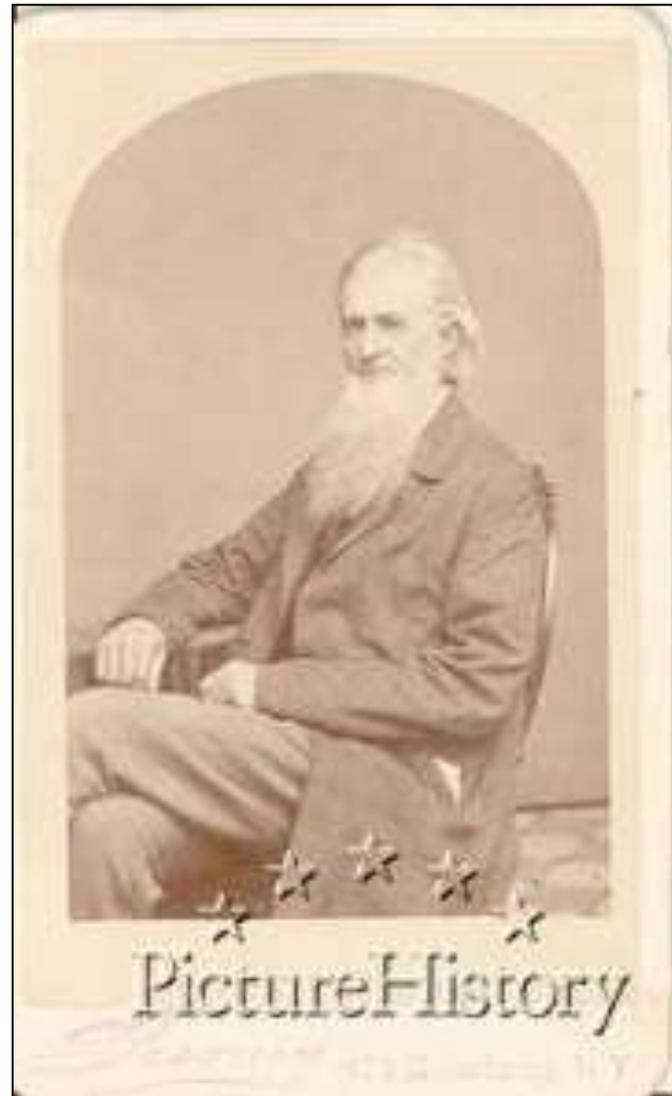
The constant misapplication and waste of labor on many of the rice plantations, is inconceivably great....it is exceedingly difficult to introduce new and improved methods of applying his labor.... It is a common thing, I am told, to see a large gang of negroes, each carrying about four shovelful of earth upon a board balanced on his head, walking slowly along on the embankment, so as to travel around two sides of a large field, perhaps for a mile, to fill a breach—a job which an equal number of Irishmen would accomplish, by laying planks across the field and running wheelbarrows upon them, in a tenth of the time.

That free labor, even of whites, can be used in rice culture, if not in Carolina, certainly in Louisiana, the poor Creoles of that State have proved. But even for Carolina, free laborers might be procured by thousands, within a year, from the rice region of China, if good treatment and moderate wages, dependent on hard work and good behavior, could be sufficiently assured to them. ...why, except for the sake of consistency, or for the purpose of bullying the moral sense of the rest of mankind, South Carolina should propose to reestablish the African slave-trade, while this resource is left, I cannot see.

The Factory v. the Plantation

Solon Robinson (1803-1880)

- pioneer agriculturalist
- journalist
 - wrote for the agricultural department of Greeley's *New York Tribune*
- reformer
 - advocated on behalf of the poor in New York.



Many other instances of the peculiar organization and functions of the Canaanite race, adapting it to the condition of slavery, and guarding it against the evils of the system, or the inattentions of a cruel or careless master might be adduced; but enough has been shown to prove that their great Master has kindly provided for those he has decreed shall be ‘servants of servants’ and hewers of wood and drawers of water’; so that under all contingencies as a race of people, they are far more comfortable and happy, and enjoy a condition far more enviable, than that of nine-tenths of the laboring peasants of Europe.

Discussion Questions

Robinson, like Olmsted, was a northerner. How did the two men come up with such different views on slavery and its effects on the enslaved?

Robinson’s account—like Olmsted’s—was based on a relatively short journey to the South. What are some of the characteristics –and potential pitfalls—of travel accounts as historical sources?

On motivating slaves:

Experience has long since taught masters, that every attempt to force a slave beyond the limit that he fixes himself as a sufficient amount of labor to render his master, instead of extorting more work, only tends to make him unprofitable, unmanageable, a vexation and a curse. If you protract his regular hours of labor, his movements become proportionably slower; and this is not the effect of long habit acquired in slavery, as is proved by the fact that on his first introduction from Africa, he possesses the same principle.

On motivating slaves:

Upon a plantation where they are universally well treated, they can, by a promise of rewards, be induced to quicken their speed in a busy time; but under a system of bad treatment and attempted force, they will at such a time slacken their speed and perform their work in a more careless and slovenly manner—fixing generally upon the most busy time, or pressing emergency, to do so. Attempt to force them with the lash when in this mood, and you will fail, for it has no terrors for them — they actually seem to possess a kind of nervous insensibility that shields them from suffering.

On the lives of slaves v. the lives of industrial workers:

And here let me inquire, *what is slavery*—you understand it? Is it to be better fed, better clothed, better housed, better lodged, better provided and cared for in infancy, sickness and old age, better loved and respected by master, mistress, children and fellow laborers, better instructed in the principles of morality and religion, and, finally, at the close of a long life of light labor, comfort and happiness, to be better and more decently buried, than are millions of the laboring population of FREEMEN in Europe, and thousands of the same class in this boasted land of liberty? For this is most truly the condition of slaves in the South.

On English industrial workers:

...what is a freeman? Stand forth, first, we who shout "long live queen Victoria;" while I display the enviable condition of Britania's *free born* citizens. Come forth from your damp and crowded cellars and fireless dens of squalid wretchedness, and exhibit your starved and emaciated forms, your sickly countenances, your toil-worn, youthful, crooked spines, your swelled joints and contorted limbs, clothed in so scanty a supply of filthy rags that they are hardly sufficient to harbor the vermin, or hide the nakedness, of proud anti-slavery England's freemen! Come forth from your dark and dismal coal-mine caverns, a thousand feet below the surface of the earth, where you live upon a scanty pittance that barely supports life, while you are able to toil, but now you are past it: come forth, then, and enjoy, in your toil-worn premature old age, the comforts provided for you in freedom's work-house.

On English industrial workers:

They have been worked, beat, duck'd and starved, and compelled, like machines, to stand up to their toil, till at the first sound of the releasing bell, they sink to the floor, unable to put forth another effort, and would rather there die than undertake at this hour to walk to their miserable homes.

Letters of Mary Paul

Mary Paul

- grew up in northern Vermont, one of four children
- began her working life as a domestic in Bridgewater, Vermont
- in 1845 went to work in the Lowell mills
- moved to New Hampshire in 1848
- 1850-51 was a member of an agricultural utopian community in New Jersey
- married in 1857
- twenty-five of her letters, covering the years 1845 through 1862, have survived

Mary Paul, letter to father, Lowell, Nov 20th, 1845

Did not stop again for any length of time till we arrived at Lowell. Went to a boarding house and staid until Monday night. On Saturday after I got there Luthera Griffith went round with me to find a place but we were unsuccessful. On Monday we started again and were more successful. We found a place in a spinning room and the next morning I went to work. I like very well have 50 cts first payment increasing every payment as I get along in work have a first rate overseer and a very good boarding place. I work on the Lawrence Corporation. Mill is No 2 spinning room.

Discussion Questions

What does this passage suggest about Mary and her reasons for going into the mills?

What does this passage suggest about the negative aspects of life in the mills?

Last Tuesday we were paid. In all I had six dollars and sixty cents paid \$4.68 for board. With the rest I got me a pair of rubbers and a pair of 50.cts shoes. Next payment I am to have a dollar a week beside my board.

Discussion Questions

What does this passage suggest about Mary and her reasons for going into the mills?

What does this passage suggest about the negative aspects of life in the mills?

...I went to work last Tuesday—warping—the same work I used to do.

It is very hard indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life but perhaps I shall get used to it....The companies pretend they are losing immense sums every day and therefore they are obliged to lessen the wages...

It is very difficult for any one to get into the mill on any corporation. All seem to be very full of help. I expect to be paid about two dollars a week but it will be dearly earned. I cannot tell how it is but never since I have worked in the mill have I been so very tired as I have for the last week...

Discussion Questions

What does this passage suggest about Mary and her reasons for going into the mills?

What does this passage suggest about the negative aspects of life in the mills?

Final slide.

Thank You