

The Factory v. the Plantation: Northern and Southern Antebellum Economies

**An Online Professional Development Seminar
For North Carolina Teachers**

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FROM THE FORUM

- Since slavery proved profitable in Virginia factories, why did the North eliminate it from its labor pool relatively quickly?
- Why was there little to no movement on the part of the antebellum South to industrialize and thus reduce its dependence on the North as it became increasingly anti-slavery?
- What role did railroads play in the contrast between the Northern and Southern antebellum economies? Did they bring the two economies closer together or move them farther apart?
- What role did tobacco play in the antebellum economy of North Carolina?

UNDERSTANDINGS

- In the U.S. both slavery and free labor are best viewed as different variants of capitalist economic organization rather than as completely distinct economic systems or modes of production.
- The operating premises behind these two labor schemes were nonetheless quite different, entailing very different means and levels of coercion, and different incentives and disincentives.
- Slave labor and free labor led to different developmental paths.
- Over time such paths led to different economic and social trajectories, helping to separate the two regions.
- These paths in and of themselves did not, however, make civil war inevitable.
- Other factors were also involved.



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- The Civil War is the central event in the American historical imagination.
- The war arose in large part because of differential patterns of economic and social development in the North and the South.
- Teachers and students often look to differences in the dominant labor schemes in the South and the North—slavery and free labor respectively—in accounting for the roots of regional differentiation in the antebellum U.S. and ultimately for the chief cause of the war.
- In the program we look closely at the two labor systems and their relationship both to patterns of social development in the North and the South, and to the coming of war.
- In so doing, we try to complicate, and, in so doing, enrich understanding of these systems and their relationship to economic development, the rise of sectionalism, and the breakdown of the Union in 1860-1861.

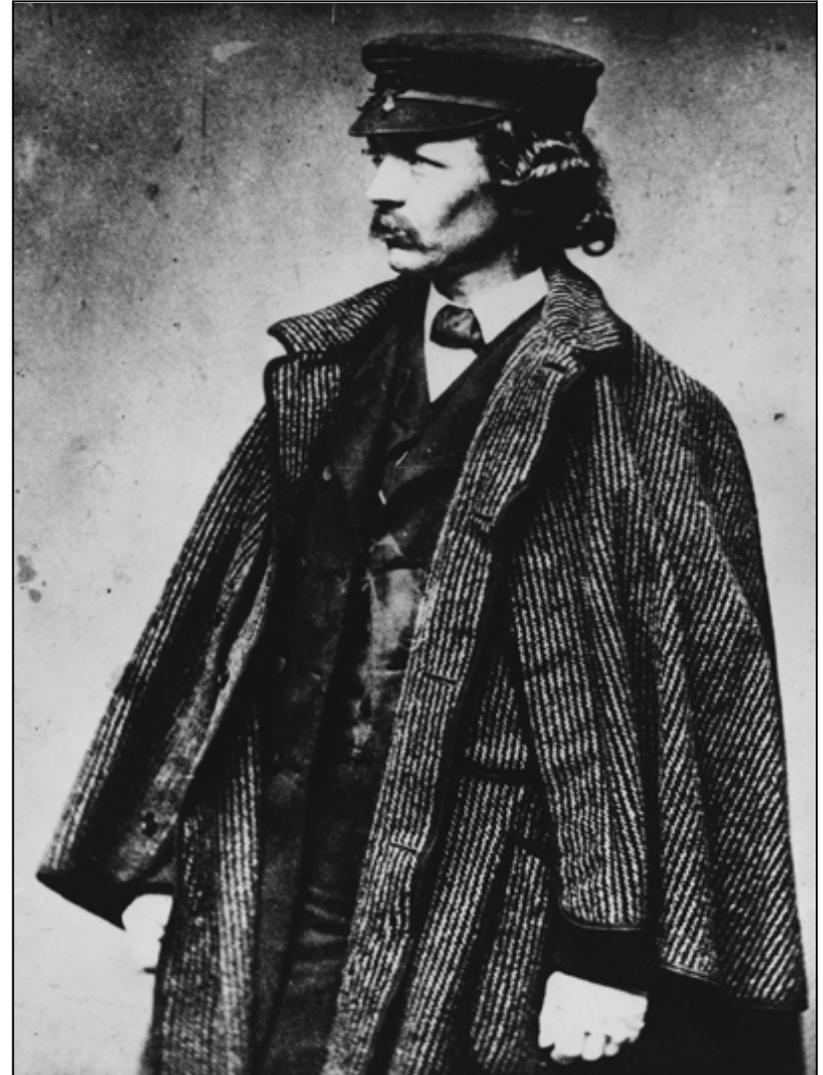
Frederick Law Olmstead, 1822-1903

- 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? (p. 479)

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?

Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, 1856*

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. (p. 475)

Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, 1856*

Put the best race of men under heaven into a land where all industry is obliged to bear the weight of such a system, and inevitably their ingenuity, enterprise, and skill will be paralyzed, the land will impoverish, its resources of wealth will remain undeveloped, or will be wasted; and only by the favor of some extraordinary advantage can it compare, in prosperity, with countries adjoining, in which a more simple, natural, and healthy system of labor prevails.

Such is the case with the Slave States. On what does their wealth and prosperity, such as it is, depend? On certain circumstances of topography, climate, and soil, that give them almost a monopoly of supplying to the world the most important article of its commerce. (p. 479)

Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, 1856*

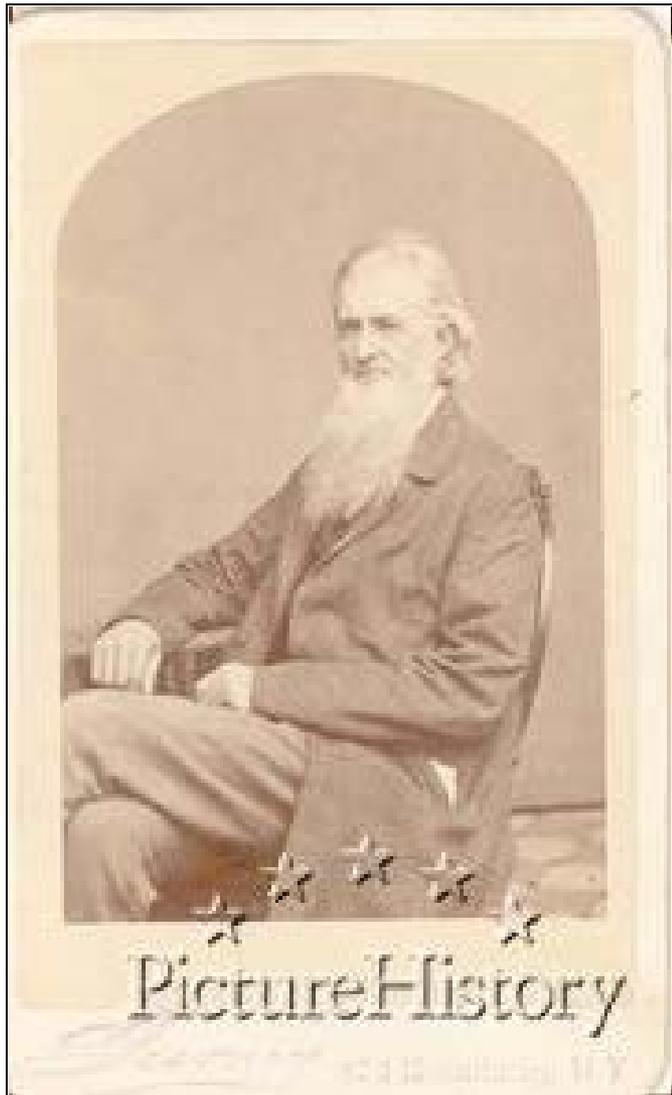
On the rice plantation which I have particularly described, the slaves were, I judge, treated with at least as much discretion and judicious consideration of economy, consistently with humane regard to their health, comfort, and morals, as on any other in all the Slave States; yet I could not avoid observing—and 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. (p. 480-1)

The constant misapplication and waste of labor on many of the rice plantations, is inconceivably great. Owing to the proverbial stupidity and dogged prejudice of the negro (but peculiar to him only as he is more carefully poisoned with ignorance than the laborer of other countries), it is exceedingly difficult to introduce new and improved methods of applying his labor. He always strongly objects to all new-fashioned implements; and, if they are forced into his hands, will do his best to break them, or to make them only do such work as shall compare unfavorably with what he has been accustomed to do without them. 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.

(p. 481)

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.

(p. 213-4)

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?

- 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

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.

(p. 125)

Discussion Questions

- What do these passages suggest about Mary and her reasons for going into the mills?
- What do these passages 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

(p. 126)

Discussion Questions

- What do these passages suggest about Mary and her reasons for going into the mills?
- What do these passages 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...

(p. 129-130)

Discussion Questions

- What do these passages suggest about Mary and her reasons for going into the mills
- What do these passages suggest about the negative aspects of life in the mills?

Final slide.

Thank You