

Immoral Rational Calculation:

The North American Slave Trade from International Traffic to the Domestic System

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In October of 1562 the English launched three ships under Queen Elizabeth I with the commission to hunt, capture and sell Africans from the Western Cape. The Queen wanted one-sixth of Captain John Hawkyns' haul. The smooth Gentleman Privateer from Plymouth would launch two more expeditions of the same type each commanding a haul of at least 300 slaves. The last expedition ended in disaster as the Spanish Crown under King Phillip II, who controlled the Atlantic Slave trade, could only be fooled twice. It would be another 60 years before such a major slave venture took place again by the English, but the haul that Hawkyns brought home had tantalized investors and a nation alike. In the 1560s England saw the economic risks as too high for a society that did not have a slave culture. But the blue prints were set.¹

Just over two centuries later the English, who eventually commanded the Atlantic slave trade, were haunted by the rhetoric of equality and the Enlightenment. She was the Mother of Colonies throughout the Caribbean and North America and while realizing the profits of the slave trade for a century and a half, she was on the verge of abolishing it forever. Her subordinates in Virginia, Maryland, North and South Carolina and Georgia were not ready to face the consequences to their economies. Following the American Revolution the Empire went one way and the new nation the other. England banned the trade of African slaves completely in 1807. The United States banned the import of slaves in 1808. Yet by 1825 with the demand of cotton textiles the country that had received the least amount of slave imports over the last 300

¹ The many adventures of John Hawkyns read like a Hollywood Pirate movie. The complexity of selling kidnapped slaves is extensive, and the violence of the adventure intriguing. For a narrative of the three slave adventures see Hazelwood, Nick. *The Queen's Slave Trader: John Hawkyns, Elizabeth I and the Trafficking in Human Souls*. NY: William and Morrow, 2004.

years had one-third of all of the slaves in the Americas.²

Hugh Thomas author of *The Slave Trade*, the most comprehensive contemporary study of the trade of slaves asks “Why should the smallest slave importer have the largest slave population?”³ What does history say concerning the North American slave trade as it made transition from the Atlantic Trade system to the self contained system within the Southern United States? If slave trade began a decline toward the end of the 18th century in the United States, but increased again with the rise of the textile industry and cotton, how did the system maintain itself after the importation of slaves was made illegal?

While the answers are not simple, comparing the two eras of slave trade shows that the motives for the increase of slavery in the United States’ interregional trade were the same as those of the English under the privateers and Companies of the English crown: profit. Both overcame heavy opposition to develop and strengthen an incredibly lucrative system, and both struggled with the morality of such an institution.

The trade network that the English entered was one that required the collaboration of African Kingdoms and European rulers. The profits realized could not be reached over the Atlantic without both sides willingly working together.⁴ The system that John Hawkyns challenged was one established by Henry the Navigator of Portugal whose initial plan was to challenge the burgeoning power of Islam as approved by Pope Eugenius IV in 1442. In 1452

² Thomas, Hugh. *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870*. NY: Touchstone, 1997. P. 572.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thornton, John. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998. P.55.

another Papal Bull allowed the Portuguese King to “subdue Saracens, pagans and other unbelievers-even to reduce them to perpetual slavery.”⁵ The Navigator’s plans fit into the mindset of the bygone crusades. That mindset declared West Africans to be the children of Ham, the lost tribe of Israel, and therefore deserving enslavement by Christians.⁶ That mindset, justified by the Bible, would wind its way into all European nations and entice every one of them to seek the profits gained by Portugal in the Sugar Islands and Brazil.⁷

John Thornton’s *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* argues that such an elaborate system with so many facets was still controlled by the African rulers who used prisoners of war as a way of making profit. African Kingdoms didn’t see land as property, but the means of labor, slaves, had value. Thus slaves were in demand and seen as capital. The idea of slaves as capital was not new to Renaissance Europe. Once the Spanish had absorbed the Portuguese in 1580 they relied on the supply of slaves that the African nations provided. Thornton argues that the Kings of the large dominant tribes could stop and start trade at will, and the Spanish and Portuguese knew this. Prior scholars had maintained that Europeans controlled the trade with enticing products like guns and horses. However these products would not become influential until into the middle of the 17th century. They were not available in the early days of the Atlantic system.⁸ Nor was the technology or military power of Europe strong enough to consistently overpower African Kingdoms. Efficiency led European Kings to cooperate with African Kings.

By 1620 the Dutch West India Company was a major competitor. The Portuguese were

⁵ Thomas, 64-67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁸ Thornton, 98-112.

challenging the combined crowns of the Spanish Empire, and the English, Danish, French and Germans were taking risks to join the business of Trans Atlantic slave trade. The Crowns of Europe and Africa began to lose exclusive control of the trade they began as privateers harassed them but as Thornton notes this loss of control was still to their benefit.⁹

The attempts that John Hawkyns and Queen Elizabeth I had made 60 years earlier demonstrated at least that the Crown and a few investors and adventurers were willing to “test the waters.” Nick Hazelwood’s *The Queen’s Slave Trader: John Hawkyns, Elizabeth I and the Trafficking in Human Souls* shows the attitudes of these businessmen once they chose to deal in human commerce. In Hawkyns final fateful journey he had to abandon 50 members of his crew to torture in Mexico and subsequently the Inquisition in Spain for his own survival. He made it back to England after fierce harassment by the Spanish and a major battle outside of Veracruz. Yet he managed to save 57 slaves to sell for profit upon return. While many accused him of making away with personal undisclosed profits the total loss of the voyage is best estimated at 30,000 pounds. His deepest criticism was that he abandoned members of his crew to forestall his financial losses by protecting slaves.¹⁰ Despite the Criticism he would be knighted in 1588 after playing a major part in the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

In 1625 an English explorer, Richard Jobson, was approached by a merchant on the Gambia River about purchasing African slaves. He replied that the English “were a people that did not deal in such commodities, neither did we buy or sell one another, or any that had our

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰ The harrowing tale of Hawkyns last voyage spans the last two chapters of Hazelwood’s narrative. The investigation into Hawkyns’ adventure was quite public and Sir Francis Drake, Hawkyns cousin and Captain of one of the vessels, became a hero.

shapes.”¹¹ Jobson’s reply shows that the commerce of slavery had not yet saturated the culture of England, but as Hazelwood points out, it would very soon:

The market was still relatively small, the returns were insufficient, and the risks too high to attract an influx of capital great enough to make slavery a major English commercial activity. The country did not yet need slaves to drive her economy; when it did, when her colonies were in place, that would be a different story.¹²

New Adventurers, traders and the Crown of England had already been at work trying to establish these colonies.

Richard Hakluyt and all of Europe had seen the successes of Sir Francis Drake against the Spanish Armada as a sign that the Spanish were vulnerable. He sought and received the Charter for the Virginia Company in 1606. He had global plans for England and they began in North America where he believed The Virginia Company could operate and continue depredations against the Spanish out of the eye of King James I. At the same time the Virginia Company could follow the model the Portuguese and Spanish had developed in Africa over the last century with the Native Americans.¹³

While early disasters at Roanoke and Jamestown caused the English to continue to question the efficacy of these adventures, the realization that tobacco could provide profit kept the Virginia colony alive. Betty Wood makes clear in *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies* that the English already had a pre-existing animosity toward strangers and foreigners and that a strong system of hierarchy already existed in England that encouraged them to take advantage of a large lot of lower ranks and serfs.

¹¹ Ibid., 309.

¹² Ibid., 308.

¹³ Morgan, Edmund Sears. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. NY: Norton, 1995. P.15-21.

African slaves were not yet desirable, but that would also change.¹⁴ Edmund Morgan shows that tobacco prices quickly began to drop in the 1620s and that tobacco laws meant to curtail that drop and raise prices for the Chesapeake planters were futile.¹⁵ Wood and Morgan agree that once the efficiency of an Indentured labor force became no longer viable, another source of labor was needed. Riots by small planters against plantation owners, A Civil War in England and a resulting decline in white labor coupled with the fear of Bacon's Rebellion lead Virginians to look at Barbados as a model for labor. Indentures were seen as whores, vagabonds and thieves, but in Virginia they were a threat of social mobility. Betty Wood describes Barbados as a "dung hill dumping ground" of Indentures that were replaced during the Sugar Revolution of the 1640s by chattel slaves when natural increase of Indentures didn't provide enough labor for the plantations.¹⁶

Oliver Cromwell sought to seize power in the Caribbean and although attempts at seizing Hispaniola were thwarted the English were able to take Jamaica. By 1640 Barbados had grown to 20,000 chattel slaves. The English slave trade boomed from 1640 to 1700 with the sugar crop. 240, 000 slaves came to Jamaica (c. 40,000), Barbados (c. 40,000) and the Leeward Islands. 30% of those slaves needed just to keep the slave population from decreasing.¹⁷ Edmund Morgan explains the cause of this growth in *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. The Navigation Acts imposed By King Charles II allowed the Royal Adventurers, turned into the Royal African Company in 1672, to have a monopoly in the English

¹⁴ Wood, Betty. *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies*. NY: Hill and Wang, 1997. P.8.

¹⁵ Morgan, 135.

¹⁶ Wood, 18.

¹⁷ Smallwood, Stephanie E.. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. P.194.

slave trade until 1698. These Acts eliminated the Dutch, their greatest competitors as a buyer of English colonial products. By controlling this trade the Monarchy stood as the greatest benefactors. Not only did the sales of sugar explode, but tobacco production greatly increased under the mushrooming slave system. Morgan tells us that the King received 1,894,000 pounds from Virginia and Maryland alone between 1692 and 1702.¹⁸ King William established a Board of Trade in 1688, with John Locke as a founding member, to show that such trade would not be at the whim of just the Monarch.¹⁹ Although the Crown was the greatest single benefactor the slave trade had obviously become efficient and had maintained colonies sufficiently rooted enough to support many private investors when the Royal African Company's monopoly was allowed to be broken in 1698.

How had England gone from a nation that “didn't deal in such commodities” as Richard Jobson declared in 1625, to one that dominated the trade in 75 years? This is the primary focus of Betty Wood's *Origin of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies*. Indentures were a liability as we saw earlier, but Woods argues that the English never set out to enslave Africans in the first place. If we look at this in conjunction with Hazelwood and Morgan, we understand that it is a pragmatic rational maneuver on a quest for profits.²⁰ The English then rationalized as the Portuguese and Spanish had two centuries earlier that the Africans were a lost tribe of Israel and had sinned against their Father Noah. African blackness was a sign of divine punishment for their sins against God.²¹ The complex mix of economic, social, ethnic and religious reasoning allowed the English at home and in the colonies to deem chattel slavery as a viable, practical and acceptable means of providing for their own freedom.

¹⁸ Morgan 196-197.

¹⁹ Ibid., p348.

²⁰ Wood 7-8.

²¹ Ibid., 24.

Wood sums up her point saying that “Racial slavery had become a central and, from the elite perspective, absolutely indispensable institution. By 1700 there was no longer any uncertainty, let alone any serious misgivings, about the status of Africans anywhere in English America.”²²

This justified racism. To be black meant to be a slave. To be a slave meant to be property. As Morgan defines it:

In Virginia neither badges nor philosophers were needed. It was not necessary to pretend or to prove that the enslaved were a different race, because they were...Racism made it possible for white Virginians to develop a devotion to the equality that English republicans had declared to be a soul of liberty. There were too few free poor on hand to matter. And by lumping Indians, mulattoes, and Negroes into a single pariah class, Virginians had paved the way for a similar lumping of small and large planters in a single master class.²³

With such a mindset so inured in North American and Caribbean culture the idea of Liberty was purely linked to the ability to own property.

Hugh Thomas reveals that even with a slave network so extensive neither English investors nor commoners outside of the colonies ever saw a chattel slave.²⁴ By the end of the 18th century 80,000 slaves were crossing the Atlantic yearly and the English population began to inquire into the acquisition of slaves that they knew existed but never saw. In England, slavery had never been legalized itself. Two actions created a popular abolition movement in the Mother Country. First in 1792, James Somerset a slave from Jamaica sued for his freedom while in England citing a prior Elizabethan case when a Russian slave sued for his freedom and was set

²² Ibid., p.8.

²³ Morgan, 386.

²⁴ Thomas, 293.

free because the Judge claimed that “England was too pure an air for slaves to breathe in.”²⁵ Somerset won his freedom to the jubilation of blacks in London, but Hugh Thomas calls this a ‘spurious’ decision as it only freed Somerset and not all slaves in the Empire. It didn’t free him from service but as a free servant he did have rights he didn’t have as a slave. The trial was public and caused quite a commotion among the population.

In 1799 the Royal Africa Company released a report at the request of the public. The inquiry was into where slaves came from and while the report didn’t damn English traders as kidnappers it did expose that half of the slaves captured by Africans before being sold to traders were lost either to death in coffles that lasted up to weeks or by escaping.²⁶ Hugh Thomas argues that these two events were key to what he calls the first popular movement. People began to call for abolition of slavery.

Thomas does also show that economics of slavery had changed by the end of the 18th century. Profits in slavery were still considerable but dropped to only 8-10% which was about the profit of most other “goods.” Cotton, wool, wine, sugar, rum, guns and many other products relied on slave trade but at this point profits in all had reached about the same level. Profits in the slave trade itself dropped because sales lowered due to higher prices needed for upkeep on aging ships and forts. In addition demographics of Africa had changed and numbers of slaves available had also drastically declined. The trade had reached its peak in 1783 with over 3 million slaves in the New World. Half of these slaves were from the English network. With all of these factors at work, more and more English citizens began to question the institution.²⁷ The debate over a decade was extensive but by January 1, 1807 the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire.

²⁵ Thomas, 473-476.

²⁶ Ibid., 387.

²⁷ Ibid., 445-449.

The same questions found themselves asked in America following the Revolution. In America the principals of the Enlightenment faced a different perspective. To Americans liberty was founded on economic independence. As Americans considered the need of the slave trade it became clear that those states that could economically abandon it would and states that depended on a constant forced labor source would have to continue to justify human bondage in the face of their own freedom. Equality would have to remain an enigma.

The question of Negro equality in the United States continuously came back to the debate of economic feasibility. States in both North and South understood the importance of the slave trade to the survival of the young nation. Ironically, Hugh Thomas tells us, it was the American Revolution that delayed a serious popular movement in the new states. White America was concerned with its own liberty. Individual states and their dates of Slave trade laws tell us where these economic lines were drawn. In 1776, in conjunction with the Declaration of Independence, New Jersey and Rhode Island abandoned slavery altogether. Two years later Virginia banned the import of more slaves from Africa. In 1783 Maryland followed Virginia in banning the importation of more slaves. North Carolina and South Carolina followed suit in 1786 and 1787 respectively. In 1788 Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York all abolished slavery forever.²⁸ Abolition occurred where slavery was not feasible compared to wage labor and in the Old South several elements contributed to the idea that importation was no longer necessary to maintain a consistent work force.

²⁸ Ibid., 500.

Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's cliometric study of slavery in *Time On the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* reveals data that explains much of the actions of the states of the old south. Much of their data revealed in 1974 lead them to come to controversial conclusions. First, natural increase of slaves had reached a level that slavery could sustain itself in the old colonies by 1720.²⁹ Fertility among African slaves in the early years of the new nation was at the point where the life expectancy was at least a half a decade longer than those in the Caribbean where children never reached the "break even" age at all.³⁰ Stephanie Smallwood corroborates this data in *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Smallwood claims that although men were desired in the slave trade, particularly in the Caribbean, demographics in Africa meant more and more women and children became part of the trade. Children made up 27% of the cargo of the Royal Africa Company between 1673 and 1725 and a greater proportion of women than men "helped ensure the flow of enslaved migrants."³¹ These ratios no doubt contributed to the sustainability of natural increase in the slave states of the American South.

Secondly, prices of imported slaves had drastically jumped compared to the prices of the commodities they produced. We have seen this earlier as crucial to England's argument concerning the continued life of the institution in the Empire. Fogel and Engerman point out that slave prices rose much faster than the prices of cotton.³²

Fogel and Engerman also concluded that slaves were not bought for conspicuous

²⁹ Fogel, Robert William. *Time On the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1974. P. 25.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ Smallwood, 164.

³² Fogel, 60.

consumption. Therefore, importing slaves without a sound business rationale was ludicrous. In the scholarship of the study this idea is considered controversial as many in the Ulrich Phillips School maintained that owning slaves was a status symbol that promoted conspicuous consumption. Nor was the Old South pre-capitalist as Eugene Genovese argued. Fogel and Engerman discuss at length that the southern slave owner was a shrewd business man who knew the costs and profits of the trade because they studied it extensively.³³

In the south slavery existed because forced slave labor was practicable. A constant work force was necessary as opposed to the growing industrial north where it was reasonable to let each individual “sell” his own labor. Much of the work in the north was seasonal or even piece work that could be bargained against, most often to the chagrin of the laborer, but on the southern plantation it made no business sense to let a worker contract for his labor. It was more efficient to buy it and use force.³⁴ This lead southern slave owners to provide for their laborers materially in order to maintain quality production. Hence, Fogel and Engerman wanted to dispel several myths including the belief that slave laborers worked under much harsher conditions than free laborers.³⁵

With slave prices at an impractical level and natural increase at a sustainable level it made business sense to maintain the slave trade system on its own. Abolishing the importation of new slaves made sense. The abolition of slavery altogether did not. Allowing the international slave trade to die did not mean that the institution was threatened. It meant a concession to those who wanted slavery abolished altogether at the Constitutional Convention. International trade was to be abolished in 1808.

³³ Ibid., 59-73.

³⁴ Ibid., 233-234.

³⁵ Ibid., p.5.

Despite the fact that the legal international slave trade was behind them slaves in the United States would reach one third of all of the slaves in the New World. If the international trade was on a decline, and there exists an historic consensus on this point, how did the United States reach such a disproportionate level of slaves compared to the rest of the Western hemisphere in the 19th century? The answer has many facets centered on the domestic auction block and interregional trade. We turn primarily to recent scholarship by Steven Deyle and Robert Gudmestad. Both authors admit that the question has been avoided for far too long. They are joined by Michael Tadman in these sentiments:

The domestic slave trade has had a curious place in southern history and has always posed problems for those seeking to portray slavery as a benign and paternal institution. In antebellum polemics about the slavery controversy, white southern propagandists pretended that the trade was only of marginal importance and that slave traders were social outcasts: in the post-slavery years the hiding of the slave trader became a compulsory ingredient in the promotion of the plantation legend.³⁶

Michael Tadman's *The Interregional Slave Trade in the History and Myth-Making of the U.S. South* is highly critical of authors of the 1970s who portrayed slavery as paternalistic, like Eugene Genovese, or statistically and materially better for the slave than the wage labor of the era like Fogel and Engerman concluded in *Time on the Cross*.

The domestic slave trade came on the heels of an explosion of cotton production with the invention of the cotton gin. One slave could do the work of 50 so more slaves were needed to "feed the machine." The increase in production capability meant also an increase in demand from English textile mills. The domestic slave system became a response to the new market revolution taking place in the Northern states and Europe. Demand for slaves in the territories

³⁶ Tadman, Michael. *"The Interregional Slave Trade in the History and Myth-Making of the U.S. South."* *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*. Yale University Press: New Haven. 2004. P. 117.

and states of the new south and subsequently the south west meant a need for the redistribution of slaves and a need for slave trade. “Speculators” would come to symbolize the savage evil of the system that provided for the new source of capital of the Upper Southern states of Virginia and Maryland as well as North and South Carolina. As Steven Deyle sums it up in his *Carry Me Back: the Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, “it put to rest any doubt of the future of slavery in the United States.”³⁷

The domestic trade led to the Cotton Kingdom of the United States. Fogel and Engerman identify the business decision involved: “It is precisely because the southerners could perceive the benefits of interregional migration, because they could perceive the ‘meaning in such economic development’ that so many of them moved.”³⁸ As whites migrated and the new states of Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana joined the nation the euphemism of paternalism replaced law and reform that was seen in the Northern States, Europe or even the Upper South. States fearing the infringement of their own rights by a strong Federal government left the “law” of slavery to individual plantations. *Time on the Cross* allows that the plantation was reminiscent of the medieval manor system in Europe and can be perceived only in that sense as paternalistic as Eugene Genovese portrayed the system. Conversely the system was capitalistic, not pre-capitalist.³⁹ Deyle and Gudmestad believe that the paternal model was a myth of justification created to forestall emancipation.

Robert Gudmestad explains that the new demand for slaves meant a demand for “speculators,” “nigger traders,” and “soul drivers” who starting large scale commerce as early as

³⁷ Deyle, Steven. *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2005. P.4-8.

³⁸ Fogel, 253.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

1815 lead coffles two times a month from the Upper South to New Orleans and Natchez in the prime travel season from October to March. The introduction of railroads and to greater degree steamships caused the trade to rise to the point where slave speculation was ubiquitous by the late 1830s. Isaac Franklin, the richest man in the south, and John Armfield built a firm that was half of the commercial slave trade. Their firm made \$250,000 in 1831-1832 and a minimum of \$100,000 a year until Franklin died in 1846. Coffles became noisy reminders of the paradox between the savagery of a chained slave march that took as long as the old middle passage and the idea that slavers were paternalistic owners.⁴⁰

The number of slaves sold by “speculators” will never be known due to poor record keeping but once the Slave Import ban was heavily enforced by 1820 advertisements of “CASH for NEGROES” were common.⁴¹ Deyle admits that slave traders were little different than capitalists in the north but there were drastically different responses to their trade. One was committed to profiting off wage labor but the other was committed to solidifying chattel slavery. Virginians who needed to sell their surplus slaves wanted to distance themselves from the Deep South where they were selling their commodity realizing that their product was not a tool like any other. The idea of receiving cash for humans stood in the face of their ideas of Noblesse Oblige and paternalism.⁴²

After the War of 1812 the Interstate demand called for young black men who could

⁴⁰ Gudmestad, Robert. *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*. Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge. 2003. P.4-6.

⁴¹ Robert Fogel used New Orleans slave trade records to show that between 1804-1862 84% of the trade involved Negroes over 14 years of age and were unmarried. He states that the number “probably” included large numbers of widows, but over all the slave trade only resulted in 13% of marriages being broken. Only 25% of the slaves sold in New Orleans were from exporting states. *Time on the Cross* p. 49-53. Later he admitted larger estimates of the slave population involved in the interstate slave trade have some validity in *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*.

⁴² A lengthy discussion of this paradox is beneficial in Chapter 4, “Cash for Negroes: Slave Traders and the Market Revolution in the South,” in Deyle’s *Carry Me Back*.

procreate quickly, withstand hard labor and carry this labor out for many years. While it is true that many planters made the journey north to purchase their own slaves, speculators sought to fill the need of those who didn't want to find their own laborers. The trade was large enough to reach a 20-30% profit by the 1830s. While southerners accepted the trade they wanted to keep their own benevolent image alive and often sought whole families as it was noble and not just for profit.⁴³ From 1810-1820 white migration south and west boomed but this migration declined drastically into the 1840s just as the migration of slaves was rapidly increasing. Plantations were developing and increased labor was needed. Coastal travel from the Upper South to New Orleans and river trade down the Ohio, Tennessee and Mississippi rivers using steamships meant that coffles could be less conspicuous and slave trade could become a desk job for firms like Franklin and Armfield. The Domestic Trade paralleled the growth of the United States.⁴⁴

Northerners were certainly aware of the economic importance of the interstate trade. The *New York Tribune* stated that between 1840 and 1850 170,000 slaves were transported from the Upper to the Lower South. With the estimate of \$500 per slave it concluded that Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina had profited to the amount of \$8,429,450.⁴⁵ The difference is that those outside of the system saw the paradox of the south claiming slavery to be a noble institution while profiting off of the sale of humans. It left southerners "to find some way to explain the presence of the interstate slave trade-clearly exploitative behavior- in the midst of an institution that was supposed to be beneficial for slaves."⁴⁶ Northern investigations, mostly by abolitionists, exposed the graphic savagery of slave pens, coffles, and auction blocks where signs advertised the sale of "Prime Negroes" right next to cattle. Auction blocks joined the image of

⁴³ Gudmestad, 9-13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁵ Deyle, 62.

⁴⁶ Gudmestad, 34-36.

the master's whip showing that violence was savage enough, but profiting in addition to the cruelty was another cruelty altogether.

When a slave named Anna jumped out of a third story window at George Millers Tavern in Washington D.C. to her death it showed the stress caused by the trade. Anna was overcome by the break up of her family. The event that took place in 1816 would lead to a new popular and political movement among northerners.⁴⁷ Congressman John Randolph championed Anna's cause in Washington and in 1831 William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp printed their first volume of *The Liberator* in Massachusetts. The publication sought to expose slavery for what it was using the highly visual auction block as its banner head. Each issue exposed the savagery of coffles and the terror of having families torn asunder. *The Liberator* sought to move the emotions of the reader against the institution to action "unless they were morally dead-dead-dead."⁴⁸

In 1839 Theodore Weld published *American Slavery As It Is* exposing further savagery in the name of the Domestic Trade. In the book Weld revealed that "speculators" were also guilty of slave breeding. He made three main arguments. First, the great increase of slaves in the United States was not due to natural increase but from "brood mares" where the best stock was "whiter for house slaves." Conditions were too harsh for natural increase. Secondly, to argue that slaves could be comfortable enough to naturally have children was absurd. Therefore it had to be forced by breeding them. Thirdly, breeding demonstrated that slavery was nothing but big business and not a noble institution regardless of any claim. In the end the cycle would

⁴⁷ Ibid., 35-61 shows that Congressman John Randolph championed a large movement against the internal slave trade. While he didn't seek abolition of slavery itself he used Anna's suicide to investigate and reveal the deplorable nature of the trade itself.

⁴⁸ Deyle, 175. Scholarship in Native American studies reveals that the papers under slaves and speculators feet on the banner head are defunct Indian Treaties. Reformers had lost the battle against Jackson's Indian Removal Act the year before. The papers were a subtle reminder that they would not lose in their fight for Abolition.

become continuous because the large increase in number of slaves put pressure on the land and further land expansion had to be the result.⁴⁹

Hugh Thomas recognizes that Weld's claims were true in Charleston, New Orleans, Memphis, Alexandria, Savannah, and Richmond but says that the trade relied mainly on natural increase. He wondered if speculators paid more attention to "uncommonly good breeders" or if they realized the capital potential of younger slaves.⁵⁰ Robert Fogel addressed the claims concerning slave breeding in *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*. Admittedly Robert Fogel was attempting to answer criticism of *Time on the Cross* fifteen years after its publishing. *Without Consent or Contract* allowed Fogel to look at the institution of slavery from a moral standpoint, something that his earlier cliometric study didn't avoid, but also didn't address. In his later study Fogel concedes that anywhere from 16-60% of the slaves in the Deep South came from the interstate trade. This allows for his earlier claim in *Time on the Cross* that 84% of the slave migration to the Deep South traveled with their masters but accepts that other numbers in certain regions exist.⁵¹ Fogel's best estimates reveal that between 1790 and 1860 835,000 slaves moved into the western cotton states. The last half of the 70 year period saw three times the migration as the first half. Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas accounted for 85% of the trade where Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas received 75% of the slaves.⁵² One thing was clear to Fogel: slave breeding was not as large a happening as Weld portrayed during the height of the trade.

To Fogel "The most jarring discovery was that slave breeding, as Weld had originally

⁴⁹ Fogel, Robert William. *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*. NY: Norton Press, 1989. P.119-120.

⁵⁰ Thomas, 570.

⁵¹ Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, p.67-68.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 65.

used the term, was neither a general policy nor a major source of profit.”⁵³ Fogel’s study revealed several factors for this conclusion: 1] the risk of venereal disease on the plantation was too large 2] Eugenics that could be used for farm animals could not be used on humans 3] emotional factors of the slave were considerable and made breeding inefficient. Distraught slaves were not good laborers. Thus, Fogel continues, economic incentives were used on plantations under one-hundred Negroes where chain labor was not used. Fogel claims that planters often sought to maintain their self image of paternalism by providing better housing for those females who became pregnant. In addition slave families would be kept together if women could bare children. Work loads were also made lighter for women with child. To Fogel this was akin to modern nations using tax incentives or subsidies to encourage more children.⁵⁴

If we revisit the data of Stephanie Smallwood that there were as many females on the plantations as males and that life expectancy was greater in the United States than in the Caribbean, as Fogel argued in *Time on the Cross*, we can accept that the great growth of slave numbers from about 500,000 at the turn of the 19th century to a number estimated as high as four million just before the Civil War came mostly from natural increase. However we must not forget that “speculators” at least attempted breeding in several cities. This then brings us to assume that slave breeding didn’t happen as much as Weld claimed but only because it wasn’t as practical as enticing slave women to have more children naturally. While natural increase doesn’t sound as beastly as breeding does it still shows that the increase of slave numbers was sought for profit. Essentially the Cotton Kingdom couldn’t survive without mass numbers of forced labor.

⁵³ Ibid., 392.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 83-85.

Slaveholders would not let the attacks of those like Randolph, Garrison and Weld go without a fight. While anti-slavery propaganda like Weld's did cause many in the Upper South to have doubts about the trade and consider reforms the institution was far too ingrained for slave owners to consider abolition of slavery, and eliminating the interstate trade would have too many negative economic implications. Reforms did come to individual states but in the south the individuality of planters meant that a large legislative voice concerning the trade would never be heard. Some owners created contracts that required sales of families only. Others required that sales had to be local or at least within the state so that kin could be close. As a result rumors (perhaps factual) showed that kidnapping of slaves had increased by "speculators" due to individual requirements that were challenging the trade. In the end, planters could come to only one justifiable defense: slavery was noble but the humanity of the "nigger trader" was in doubt.⁵⁵

Robert Gudmestad asks the begging question, if there was enough doubt and concern about the trade why did it continue to grow? His answers are stark: 1] the greatest portion of slave owners didn't doubt the trade 2] the trade allowed for the release of surplus slaves in the Upper South and fulfilled the growing need of labor in the Deep South 3] the trade allowed the Upper South to rid itself of undesirable slaves to plantations where they would work in chain labor 4] the trade still provided the most substantial source of wealth 5] Racism was so embedded after centuries of justifying slavery that many saw slaves as no better than animals.⁵⁶ Ultimately even those who had the deepest reservations about the trade accepted it.

At best those who questioned the trade accepted token legislation that was meant to quiet

⁵⁵ Gudmestad, 62-82 provides a detailed account of the struggle of slaveholders and the paradox caused by the slave market.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

public concerns. Christian Evangelicals were opposed to the savagery of the trade and break up of families but agreed with the principals of slavery defended in the Bible. Plantations continued to expand, reform laws came and went and Evangelicals attacked “speculators” on the high ground that to take cash in human trade was heinous.⁵⁷ Slave traders like Franklin and Armfield were able to distance themselves from the public in the Firm House and agents did the best they could to put a good face on the trade. Finally the simplest way to deal with the slave trade was to minimize it. Underestimating the size of the traffic was the best defense against Northern Abolitionists. At every chance the language of paternalism was used. Slavers considered themselves noble and obligated to give the slave a Christian life without ever making the mistake of giving the slave the idea that he would be better off free. Slavers rode this rationality into the conflagration of the Civil War.

Steven Deyle claims that historic amnesia has allowed the United States to ignore the horrors of the slave trade. The south of *Gone With The Wind* allows us to white wash and soften the imagery. By ignoring our own nation’s responsibility of the growth of the institution through a domestic slave trade that revived a declining system we can see the peculiar institution as just a left over from the colonial days that we did not create.⁵⁸

Robert Gudmestad is even more damning saying “The southern interpretation of the interstate slave trade shows just how far the southerners were willing to go to deny reality. They reduced the relationship between master and slave to a crude caricature where the slaves were rarely separated from their relatives and the masters were more concerned with pleasing their

⁵⁷ Ibid., 118-123.

⁵⁸ Deyle, 12-13.

bond servants than with financial survival.”⁵⁹

The controversial work of Robert Fogel, *Time On the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, sought to dispel many myths about slavery but he yielded in *Without Consent or Contract* that “The slave trade was one of the ugliest aspects of American slavery and probably was one of the most effective issues in rallying support for the anti-slavery cause.”⁶⁰ The cause fought to convince southern planters that their exploitation was immoral but they would not relent even in the face of the moral debate.

Finally we can see that if we return to 1625 and the thought of the English explorer Richard Jobson, or 1831 with Abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, to deal in human commodities is despicable. Though many slaveholders who benefited from the rational economics of the system deplored the actual trade and wrestled with its morality after two-hundred and forty years they were still able to justify it to themselves. “Nigger Traders” and “Speculators” served as scapegoats for a system that relied on them. Rational calculation can justify anything in the name of capitalist profit. We have seen it integral to religious hatred, racial superiority and piracy. A few historians have begun to elaborate on the domestic slave trade. Until recently our nation has avoided taking responsibility for the degradations and injustices preferring that slavery be remembered as a tragedy left over from the colonial period.

⁵⁹ Gudmestad, 201.

⁶⁰ Fogel