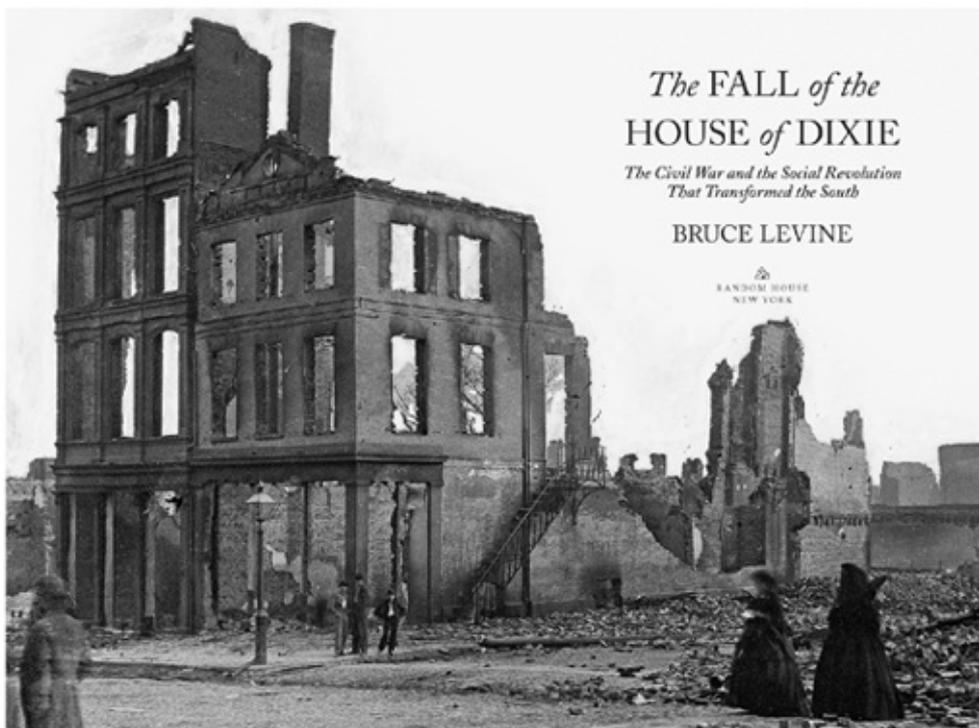


THE FALL *of the* HOUSE OF DIXIE

**THE CIVIL WAR AND THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION
THAT TRANSFORMED THE SOUTH**

BRUCE LEVINE



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Decades after the Civil War ended, Katherine Stone recalled the “gay, busy life” she had led at Brokenburn, her family’s 1,200-acre plantation in prewar Louisiana. “There was always something going on—formal dining, informal ‘spend the days,’ evening parties, riding frolics,” fox hunts. To make these and other diversions possible, Katherine remembered, her family had “quite a corps of servants to keep us well waited on,” since naturally “no one expected to wait on himself.” Each of Katherine’s young brothers also “owned a little darkie in the quarters who would eventually become his body servant.” And some 150 other slaves toiled in Brokenburn’s cotton and sugarcane fields, “six days out of seven, week after week, month after month, year after year,” generating the wealth that sustained the Stone family’s life of “luxurious ease.”

The war’s outbreak in April 1861 augured the end of the Stone family’s complacent idyll. The fighting between North and South, Katherine soon perceived, had “infected” her slaves with hope for a radical change in their condition. Some were becoming “lazy and disobedient” and “giving a lot of trouble” generally. One evening, as the Stones took the night air on the gallery of their plantation home, “a runaway Negro” darted past them. Though Katherine’s brothers leaped to the pursuit, the desperate fugitive made good his escape. She and her neighbors began to worry that they were living “on a mine.”

Seeking refuge from such anxieties, Katherine turned to the works of a popular southern author—Edgar Allan Poe. With her nerves already frayed, however, she decided to avoid “his most fearsome pieces.” Perhaps she chose “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Neither grisly nor filled with supernatural horrors, it might well have seemed a relatively safe distraction from the unsettling events of the day.

As that story begins, Poe’s narrator pays a visit to an old friend, Roderick Usher, the scion of a “very ancient family” and current master of its imposing mansion. At first glance, the massive edifice “gave little token of instability.” But its seeming solidity conceals “a barely perceptible fissure which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zig-zag direction, until it became lost” in the foundation and the lake adjacent to it. After a while, the mansion’s hidden structural fault begins to announce itself, at first in a “muffled reverberation,” then in a mounting roar and powerful shudder. Finally, as the visitor watches in shock, that once barely discernible fissure gapes dramatically open, the walls tumble, and the august mansion collapses, burying its owner under the rubble. The surrounding lake’s waters then close “sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher.’ ”

If Katherine Stone did choose to read this tale, it could hardly have offered her much comfort. She, too, resided in an imposing and outwardly sturdy structure—the House of Dixie, the slavery-based society of the American South. And hers, too, was already beginning to display deep fissures running through it. As the Civil War continued, those fissures would widen until the whole structure fell.

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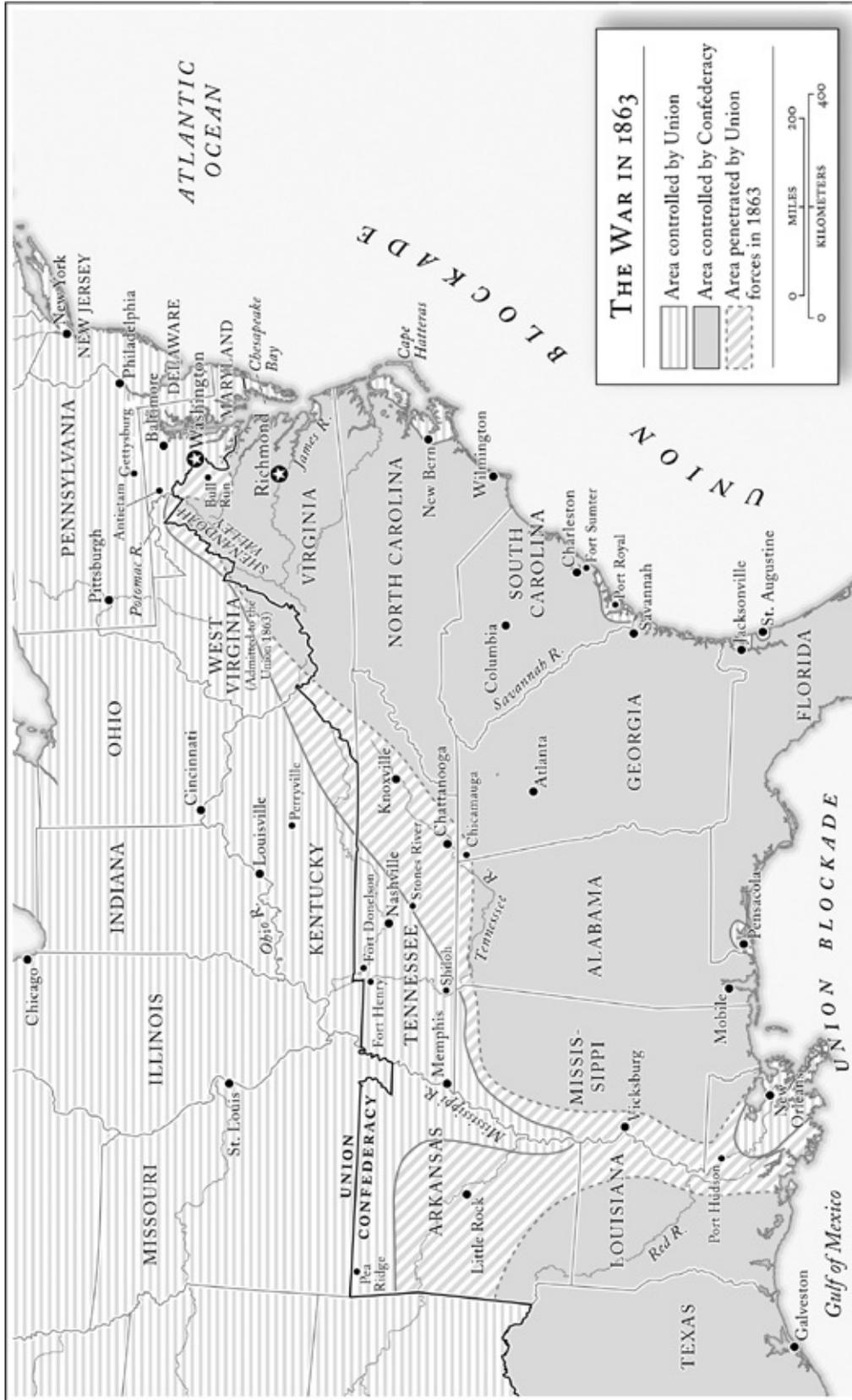
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Introduction

In the middle of the nineteenth century, southern writers and politicians boasted often—and with considerable justification—that their states were the richest, most socially stable, and most politically powerful in the United States as a whole. Southern farms and plantations yielded handsome profits to their owners, who were some of the wealthiest people in the country, and the southern elite had controlled all three branches of the federal government during most of its existence. At the root of all this economic and political power lay the institution of slavery—an institution that, as the former slave Frederick Douglass would later recall, then “seemed impregnable.” Few could then have imagined, he noted, “that in less than ten years from that time, no master would wield a lash and no slave would clank a chain in the United States.”¹

But what almost no one foresaw in 1860 is exactly what came to pass. In Mark Twain’s words, the Civil War and its aftermath “uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country.”² The most important and dramatic of these transformations was the radical destruction of slavery. About one out of every three people in the South suddenly emerged from bondage into freedom, a change of such enormous significance and full of so many implications as almost to defy description.

For the South’s ruling families, meanwhile, the war turned the world upside down. It stripped them of their privileged status and their most valuable property. It deprived them of the totalitarian power they had previously wielded over the men, women, and children who produced most of the South’s great wealth. “The events of the last five years,” a Memphis newspaper editor summarized in 1865, “have produced an entire revolution in the entire Southern country. The old arrangement of things is broken up.”³ The ex-Confederate general Richard Taylor lodged the same complaint that year. “Society has been completely changed by the war,” he wrote. Even the stormy French Revolution of the previous century “did not produce a greater change in the ‘Ancien Régime’ than has this in our social life.”⁴ Abraham Lincoln applauded this “total revolution of labor” as “a new birth of freedom.”⁵ Black South Carolinians cheered this “mighty revolution which must affect the future destiny of the world.”⁶

Even as it upended society in the South, the Civil War era transformed the shape of national politics in the United States as a whole. Beginning with Lincoln’s election in 1860, it finally broke the southern elite’s once-iron grip on the federal government and drove its leaders into the political wilderness. Into the offices that planters and their friends had previously occupied there

now stepped northerners with very different values, priorities, and outlooks. These new men used their political might to encourage the growth and development of manufacturing, transportation, finance, and commerce and thereby sped the country's transformation into the economic colossus familiar to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Under the hands of these same men, meanwhile, the post-Civil War federal government assumed key roles previously assigned to the states, including the power and the responsibility to safeguard the freedom and rights of the nation's citizens—citizens whose ranks now expanded to include millions of former slaves. Constitutional amendments adopted in the war's aftermath laid the legal basis for and pointed the way toward transforming the United States into a multiracial republic.

Relatively few people today are aware of just how all this happened. Although “the military movements connected with the Civil War are well known,” a witness to those events commented decades afterward, “the great mass of American people know but little, and so think less” about the destruction of slavery and all that it entailed.⁷ That observation holds true after the passage of another century and more.

The Fall of the House of Dixie was written to help fill that gaping hole in our collective memory. It traces the origins and development of America's “second revolution,” explaining why it occurred and how it unfolded—especially how this great and terrible war undermined the economic, social, and political foundations of the old South, destroying human bondage and the storied world of the slaveholding elite. In recent years many scholarly books and articles have analyzed the Civil War's momentous consequences. But bookstore shelves allotted to the Civil War are to this day filled principally with detailed accounts of armies, officers, and the battles they fought, great and small. Nearly every major study of the Civil War as a whole—especially those aimed at a wide audience—continues to take the military story as its organizing principle and narrative spine.

The Fall of the House of Dixie by no means ignores that subject. The slave-based society of the American South required powerful blows to break it along its lines of internal stress. Union armies delivered those blows—blows that therefore make up a crucial part of the story told in this book. But the chapters that follow focus especially upon the transformation of that war from a conventional military conflict into a revolutionary struggle. And they emphasize the ways in which very different groups of people—slave owners, slaves, the great mass of slaveless southern whites, and both Union and Confederate soldiers, black as well as white—experienced and helped to bring about what one newspaper at the time called “the greatest social and political revolution of the age.”⁸

Chapter One

THE HOUSE OF DIXIE

The House of Dixie was an imposing thing indeed. On March 4, 1858, South Carolina planter and political leader James Henry Hammond rose on the floor of the U.S. Senate to emphasize the slave states' wealth, power, and solidity to northern colleagues who were then challenging some of their prerogatives.

One of the things that Hammond boasted of that day was the South's sheer physical size, which had grown greatly since the nation's founding. The number of southern slave states more than doubled over those years with the creation of Kentucky (in 1792), Tennessee (in 1796), Louisiana (in 1812), Mississippi (in 1817), Alabama (in 1819), Missouri (in 1821), Arkansas (in 1836), Florida (in 1845), and Texas (in 1845). "If we never acquire another foot of territory for the South," Hammond summarized, "look at her. Eight hundred and fifty thousand square miles. As large as Great Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Spain" combined. Here, surely, Hammond trumpeted, was "territory enough to make an empire" that might "rule the world."¹

But the American South was more opulent and formidable than even its great size suggested. Of the more than twelve million souls who resided there, almost one out of every three was enslaved—owned outright by others.² As commodities that could be (and were) freely bought and sold, slaves themselves were immensely valuable. At prices quoted on the markets of the day, those nearly four million human beings were worth something like \$3 billion—an immense sum, especially at that time, a sum that exceeded the value of all the farmland in all the states of the South, a sum fully three times as great as the construction costs of all the railroads that then ran throughout all of the United States.³

Still more important to southern wealth than even the enormous potential sale price of these human beings was the work that they could be made to perform. The efforts of slaves yielded more than half of all the South's tobacco; almost all of its sugar, rice, and hemp; and nine-tenths of its cotton.⁴

The last item on this list, cotton, was in aggregate the single most valuable commodity produced in the United States. It was a key raw material for the international Industrial Revolution and therefore of trans-Atlantic commerce. By 1860, in fact, the American South was producing two-thirds of all the commercially grown cotton in the world and about four-fifths of the cotton that Great Britain's mammoth textile industry consumed every year. The cotton trade was just as important to the national economy of the United States. The ubiquitous dirty-white bales that were hauled down to coastal wharves and there packed into the holds of big ships destined for European

markets accounted for about half the value of all the United States' exports, as they had since the 1830s.

Small wonder, then, that most of the country's richest men lived in the slave states and that the nation's dozen wealthiest counties, per capita, were all located in the South.⁵

Slaves were by far the most valuable properties one could own in the southern states. But only a minority of white southerners (about one-fourth) owned human beings in 1860, and among those who did, the size of their property holding varied dramatically.⁶

The typical master owned between four and six slaves.⁷ That much human property made him or her many times as prosperous as the average southern farmer but considerably less wealthy than those masters who owned at least twenty slaves, for whom the federal census bureau reserved the title of "planter."⁸ Only one out of eight southern masters belonged to this group—some forty-six thousand in total. But as a group, they controlled more than half of all the South's slaves and an even larger share of its total agricultural wealth.⁹

Some planters were far richer than others. The true planter aristocracy embraced ten thousand families that owned fifty or more slaves apiece.¹⁰ These were the people who, as the former North Carolina slave William Yancey later recalled, "gave shape to the government and tone to the society. They had the right of way in business and in politics."¹¹

Among these people were Patrick M. Edmondston and his wife, Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, who owned two plantations in northeastern North Carolina.¹² Jefferson Thomas and Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas owned Belmont, a plantation in east-central Georgia that by 1861 boasted ninety slaves.¹³ In Virginia, Edmund Ruffin, a well-known agricultural innovator and a tireless exponent of slavery's merits, also claimed a place in this charmed circle. So did Robert E. Lee and his wife, Mary Fitzhugh Custis Lee. Both came from old Virginia planter families. Mary's father, George Washington Parke Custis, was one of the state's largest planters. He left the Lees one of his three plantations (Arlington) and sixty slaves to work it.¹⁴

About one in fifteen planter families enjoyed wealth that dwarfed the holdings of even the Ruffins, Lees, Edmondstons, and Thomases. Each of these three thousand or so families owned at least 100 slaves in 1860.¹⁵ The family of Louisiana's Katherine Stone was one of these.¹⁶ Twenty-five to thirty miles south of the Stones' Brokenburn plantation lay Davis Bend, a peninsula formed by the twists and turns of the Mississippi River. It contained Jefferson Davis's 1,800-acre cotton plantation, named Brierfield, and the 113 slaves who lived and labored on it.¹⁷ Rev. Charles Colcock Jones, who spearheaded the campaign to bring a proslavery form of Christianity to southern bondspeople, owned 129 slaves on three plantations in coastal Georgia's Liberty County.¹⁸ Robert Toombs, who became the Confederacy's first secretary of state, held 176 slaves and 2,200 acres of land in three counties.¹⁹

And even richer than *these* moneyed masters were about three hundred planters who each owned at least 250 people. One of them was Jefferson Davis's brother, Joseph; another was Howell Cobb, who at various times served as Georgia's governor, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and secretary of the Treasury, and went on to become the Speaker of the Confederacy's provisional Congress.²⁰ A third was James Henry Hammond. The son of a teacher and minor businessman who had married into the planter class, by 1860 he owned 338 people. Another South Carolinian, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Sr., published the fire-eating *Charleston Mercury*; Rhett owned at least two rice plantations and more than 400 slaves.²¹ Other Palmetto State planters of comparable wealth included Colonel James Chesnut, Sr., master of the grand Mulberry plantation in Kershaw County. His son, James, Jr., sat successively in both houses of the U.S. Congress and later became a Confederate brigadier general and aide to Jefferson Davis.

At the very apex of the South's social pyramid stood about fifty southern planters, each of whom owned at least five hundred slaves. Some owned considerably more than that.²² The richest planter in North Carolina was Thomas P. Devereux, the father of Catherine Devereux Edmondston, referred to earlier. He owned more than one thousand people.²³ Georgia's James Hamilton Couper owned fifteen hundred.²⁴

In the words of North Carolina plantation mistress Gertrude Thomas, members of the planter elite enjoyed the "life of luxury and ease."²⁵ Many lived in homes that were palatial by the standards of their day. In eastern Virginia, John Armistead Selden presided over the venerable Westover plantation. Its mansion boasted a great hall, a dining room that regularly hosted more than fifty, a grand stairway, multiple fireplaces, a lush garden, and a lawn that carpeted the 150 feet between the mansion and the James River.²⁶ In Virginia's Chesapeake region, Richard Baylor's neoclassical mansion, Kinloch, boasted twenty-one rooms, eighteen fireplaces, four great halls, an imposing front portico, and an observation deck that overlooked the valley of the Rappahannock River.²⁷ James Hamilton Couper modeled his Hopeton plantation in Georgia on an Italian villa. Its main house was three stories tall and had twenty-three rooms, elegant gardens, and a grand staircase descending from the second-floor entranceway. Here, if anywhere, were the mansions celebrated in Hollywood's version of *Gone with the Wind*.

In some of the richest but more recently settled cotton-growing states, elite society was still too new and its members too preoccupied with assembling their slave workforces in 1860 to devote much time or money to elegance and ostentation. In northeastern Louisiana, for example, the Stone family was living in what its members considered a temporary dwelling on their Brokenburn plantation. It, too, was big, with long galleries and two great halls. But it was nothing compared with the structure they looked forward to building soon.²⁸

Such "big houses" (as they were generally called) were not only grand; they

were also furnished and filled “with everything that a hundred years or more of unlimited wealth could accumulate,” much of it purchased in the North and in Europe. So noted the assiduous diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut, who was born into a prominent Mississippi planter family and who married James Chesnut, Jr.²⁹ In addition to their rural residences, many of the larger low-country planters also owned stately town houses in cities such as Charleston, Augusta, Savannah, Natchez, Mobile, and New Orleans. Those urban abodes commonly featured impressive gardens fronted by high walls and large iron gates, all of which spared owners the proximity to and shielded them from the gaze of less privileged passersby.

In their free time, families like the Stones of Louisiana always had “something going on” (as Katherine put it). They entertained themselves with hunting, boating regattas, and horse races (using slave oarsmen and slave jockeys), lavish dinner parties, and balls. They summered at northern spas in Saratoga Springs, Cape May, Niagara Falls, Newport, and Montreal and at southern resorts such as Biloxi, Pass Christian, and the springs of western Virginia.

The southern states of the Union contained the nation’s least developed school system. But the planters’ children wanted for few educational advantages. Private tutors provided individual instruction. Daughters attended elite female academies. Sons went off to colleges in the South, in the North, and in Europe.³⁰ A leisurely and luxurious “grand tour” of Europe often followed college, allowing future leaders of the southern elite to bathe in the high culture of the Old World.

At least as impressive as their sheer wealth and personal comfort was the slave masters’ political might. Robert E. Lee’s wartime aide-de-camp, Colonel Charles Marshall, later recalled “the controlling influence” that “the owners of slaves” enjoyed “in the management of affairs in the Southern States.”³¹ In the capitals of nearly every state that would go on to join the Confederacy, slave masters occupied at least half the legislative seats in 1860. In Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina, more than a third of those seats belonged to full-fledged planters. In South Carolina, planters claimed not a third but more than half of those positions.³²

But the masters’ writ ran far beyond the confines of their own states. They also exercised tremendous power over the United States as a whole, and they had done so for generations. James Henry Hammond put it bluntly in his Senate speech of 1858. “We, the slaveholders of the South, took our country in her infancy,” led it to independence, and have since then continued “ruling her for sixty out of the seventy years of her existence.” Since the Revolution, in fact, nearly all the occupants of the White House had been either slave masters (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James Polk, and Zachary Taylor) or the allies and advocates of masters (Martin Van Buren, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan). The same kind of men consistently controlled

both the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court.³³

The masters used all this political power to secure and extend the economic system that gave them their wealth, authority, and comfort—a system squarely based on slave labor. The South’s four million slaves formed the core of its laboring population. “They are the source in large measure of our living, and comprise our wealth,” the Georgia planter and Presbyterian minister Charles Colcock Jones reminded his fellow churchmen in 1861. Slaves and the profits that their labor yielded paid for “our education, our food, and clothing, and our dwellings, and a thousand comforts of life that crowd our happy homes.” They also performed many other vital kinds of labor: From the slave quarters came “our boatmen ... on the waters; our mechanics and artisans to build our houses, to work in many trades;... they prepare our food, and wait about our tables and our persons, and keep the house.”³⁴

As Jones noted, slaves toiled in all sectors of the southern society and economy. Some worked in the region’s relatively small urban economy, in workshops, factories, and a variety of commercial establishments. Others labored as household servants in the masters’ homes in town or country or as artisans of various kinds on their farms and plantations. But the great majority, perhaps three-quarters, worked the land. As Jones put it, they were “our agriculturalists to subdue our forests, to sow, and cultivate, and reap our land; without whom no team is started, no plough is run, no spade, nor hoe, nor axe is driven.”³⁵ The 1860 census estimated that one in every ten slaves cultivated tobacco (centered in parts of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri), another one in ten raised sugar, rice, or hemp (in Virginia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina). And more than half worked in the cotton fields (especially in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana).

Katherine Stone noted some of the characteristics of slave labor that made it most attractive to landowners anxious to turn a profit. Slaves could be made to perform especially heavy, intensive, and continuous work in return for just “the bare necessities of life.” James Henry Hammond accounted for slavery’s importance in just those terms in a well-known open letter to British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. *Only* slaves, Hammond held, could be made to work as hard while costing the landowner so little. People who enjoyed the right to protest, resist, or simply refuse such terms would never tolerate such conditions.³⁶

The South’s slaves worked very hard indeed. It was “no uncommon thing,” Katherine Stone remembered, for the more productive slaves in her family’s cotton fields to pick “five or six hundred pounds each day for maybe a week at a time.”³⁷ That was almost three times as much cotton as agricultural workers would pick after slavery was abolished.

What was the secret of this enormous prewar cornucopia? How did masters manage to get so much work out of their human property? Perhaps, Stone suggested, the answer was to be found in the pleasure that slaves found in

their work. “The Negroes really seemed to like the cotton picking most of all,” she later mused. And spurring that enthusiasm, Stone presumed, were the “prizes” awarded to the most productive—“money for the men and gay dresses for the women.”³⁸

Some masters did offer modest rewards (what modern economic historians would call “positive incentives”) to encourage the hardest, fastest, and most continuous work. But masters did not have enough confidence in the persuasive power of these incentives to depend upon them alone.³⁹ Field workers disinclined to chase after such prizes (just like those who tried but fell short) soon encountered “negative incentives”—especially the whips with which masters and supervisors inflicted “stripes” upon their bodies. In fact, the regular application of that kind of violence accounted for much of slavery’s extraordinary output. When some South Carolina masters wished to gift one another on special occasions, they gave cowhide whips.⁴⁰

The northern traveler Frederick Law Olmsted witnessed this form of what masters called “slave management” in action one day. He was touring a plantation on horseback in the company of its overseer. As the two men rode along, they saw a black girl apparently trying to avoid her assigned tasks. The overseer promptly dismounted and “struck her thirty or forty blows across the shoulder with his tough, flexible, ‘raw-hide’ whip,” Olmsted recorded. “At every stroke the girl cringed and exclaimed, ‘Yes, sir!’ or ‘Ah, sir!’ or ‘Please, sir!’ ” Unsatisfied that the young woman had yet learned her lesson, the overseer made her pull up her dress and lie down on the ground facing skyward. He then “continued to flog her with the raw-hide, across her naked loins and thighs, with as much strength as before.” As he beat her, she lay “writhing, groveling, and screaming, ‘Oh, don’t, sir! Oh, please stop, master! Please, sir! Please, sir! Oh, that’s enough, master! Oh, Lord! Oh, master, master! Oh, God, master, do stop! Oh, God, master! Oh, God, master!’ ”

Unable to watch any longer, Olmsted spurred his horse away from the scene—though the sound of whip lashes, screams, and finally “choking, sobbing, spasmodic groans” continued to fill his ears. The overseer then caught up with his guest. Laughing at Olmsted’s squeamishness, he explained that the offending young woman had tried “to cheat me out of a day’s work.” But, the aghast visitor asked, “Was it necessary to punish her so severely?” “Oh yes, sir,” the overseer replied between additional chuckles. “If I hadn’t, she would have done the same thing again to-morrow, and half the people on the plantation would have followed her example.... They’d never do any work at all if they were not afraid of being whipped.”⁴¹

Olmsted supposed that the scene he had just witnessed was a common one, and in that he was quite correct. “It is true,” South Carolina lawyer and political leader William Harper readily acknowledged in an often-reprinted essay, “that the Slave is driven to labor by stripes.” And why? The answer was simplicity itself: because that was “the best method of punishment.”⁴² Daniel Hundley was a proud southern lawyer and writer who would eventually

become a staunch Confederate. But even he complained in 1860 about the increasing number of money-hungry planters that he saw around him. On the farms and plantations of such men, he wrote, “the crack of his whip is heard early, and the crack of the same is heard late, and the weary backs of his bondmen and his bondwomen are bowed to the ground with over-tasking and overtoil, and yet his heart is still unsatisfied; for he grasps after more and more, and cries to the fainting slave: ‘Another pound of money, dog, or I take a pound of flesh!’ ”⁴³

Hundley was anxious to attribute such conduct to only the greediest and cruelest masters. In fact, however, cracking whips and piercing cries were heard throughout the South. Robert E. Lee liked to think of himself as a humane owner. But he could react as fiercely as any other when his power and authority were challenged. In 1859, three of Lee’s slaves—Wesley Norris, his sister, and a cousin named Mary—attempted to escape from the Arlington plantation. Recaptured in Maryland, the unfortunate people were jailed there for two weeks and then delivered back into Lee’s hands. Promising to teach them a lesson they would not soon forget, Lee had them taken to the barn, stripped to the waist, and whipped between twenty and fifty times each on their bare flesh by a local constable named Dick Williams. As the punishment proceeded, Wesley Norris later related, Lee “stood by, and frequently enjoined Williams to ‘lay it on well,’ ” which he did.⁴⁴

Masters recognized clearly that legally free field laborers could not be worked as hard or forced to submit to such treatment. At the very least, they would simply abandon plantation labor. But flight was only one of the specters haunting the planters’ imaginations. Almost equally daunting was the thought of what legally free workers might do if they remained in the fields. William Harper dared his readers to “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 ensure the destruction of the whole crop.” Harper’s own imagination, he confessed, was not up to that challenge. After all, he asked, “What planter would venture to carry on his operations under such circumstances?”⁴⁵ Without slavery, Harper therefore concluded, the plantation system would simply collapse, reducing the southern elite to “utter poverty and misery” and spreading “dissolution” throughout the land.⁴⁶

The slaves’ centrality to southern prosperity did encourage masters to keep their field hands alive, if possible—and therefore to provide them, as Katherine Stone recalled, with at least “the bare necessities of life.” But with a sharp eye on the bottom line, as Stone also acknowledged, masters gave most of their poorly sheltered, coarsely clothed, and badly nourished human property little “hope of more” than that.⁴⁷

This set of opposing impulses—one aimed at keeping slaves at least minimally fit, the other preoccupied with reducing the cost of their maintenance—governed the health of slaves. Masters profited when slaves became parents, so masters encouraged their slaves to have children. When

Catherine Edmondston's slave Vinyard delivered a male child, her mistress was delighted. "If the child lives I intend to bring him up as a table servant, have him in [service] by the time he can walk and talk & never let him be rusty."⁴⁸ James Henry Hammond was deeply disappointed when his slave Anny delivered a stillborn child. "Bad luck," he grumbled about that loss of a hoped-for asset—a loss the more bitter because during the last months of her pregnancy Anny had "not earned her salt."⁴⁹

Anny's tragedy was by no means unusual. The intensive labor that slave women performed, the unhealthy locales in which many plantations sat, the minimal quantity and quality of food, clothing, and shelter provided to slaves—all these things took a high toll. Throughout the South, one out of every three children born into slavery died before reaching his or her first birthday; a white infant's chance of surviving was twice as good.⁵⁰ Conditions were even harsher in the rice and sugar districts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana. On some sugar plantations, more than half of all slaves died during childhood.⁵¹ In the rice districts, two-thirds of all slave children died before reaching the age of sixteen. At Gowrie, one of Charles Manigault's rice plantations, nine of every ten children suffered that fate.⁵²

Slave owners commonly claimed to be paternalistic Christian masters. They used their power, they said, to improve the lives not only of themselves but of their dependents, black as well as white. James Henry Hammond and other champions of slavery thus claimed that masters made black families much stronger and more cohesive than they would have been in freedom.

In fact, however, masters broke up slave families all the time, tearing wives away from husbands and children away from parents as they sold off individual family members to slave traders or to other masters. Sometimes masters did this because they needed money. Slaves also found themselves sold as punishment, because they (or someone else in their family) had earned the master's displeasure. And when a master died, heirs and creditors divided the deceased's slaves among themselves like any other form of property, breaking up families as they saw fit. That is what happened, for example, when Katherine Stone's uncle died of a fever in 1861. One heir received a woman named Sydney and her younger children. Sydney's older children, however, went to another heir. This, Katherine acknowledged in her diary, was "a great grief" to Sydney and her family. Stone quickly added that it was also "a distress to us." But the masters' regret did not prevent the division from proceeding.⁵³

The geographical expansion and migration that produced the states of the lower South tore apart an enormous number of slave families. Because the U.S. Congress had outlawed any further importation of slaves from Africa in 1808, slaves for the new states had to come from the old ones. Between 1820 and 1860, an average of two hundred thousand slaves were transported *every decade* from the more northerly situated slave states to those farther south and west.⁵⁴ Other people were sold in large numbers from one part of the cotton

kingdom to another. Most reached their destinations in “coffles,” long lines of men, women, and children (ranging in number from thirty to forty upward into the hundreds) who were roped, manacled, or chained together and marched on foot over their long journeys.⁵⁵

Great numbers of them had first been separated from their parents, spouses, or children, never to lay eyes on their families again. Thomas Rutling was born into slavery in Tennessee in the 1850s. His earliest memory was of his mother being sold and sent away from him when he was still a small child. He remembered that “she kissed me and bade me good by, and how she cried when they led her away.” The last word that Thomas ever heard about his mother was that her new owner had whipped her “till she was almost dead.”⁵⁶ The master of a Georgia woman sold her away from her baby in order to pay a gambling debt. The distraught mother could not sleep at night. “Every time I shut my eyes I hear my baby cry, ‘Take me wid you mamma; take me wid you!’ I put my fingers in my ears, but all the time I hear him just the same, crying, ‘Take me wid you, mammy; take me wid you!’ ”⁵⁷

In North Carolina, the planter Joseph Thomas purchased a man named Sam from a slave trader. Thomas subsequently passed Sam on to his son and daughter-in-law, Jefferson and Gertrude. Subsequent sales then tore Sam’s family apart. He watched helplessly as his daughter was sold away from him, just as that daughter later suffered her children being taken from her. Hearing about all this from Sam, Gertrude Thomas found it “really interesting.” She coped with whatever distress it may have caused her by repeating one of the shibboleths dear to southern masters. People like Sam and his daughter, Gertrude assured herself, could cope with the serial destruction of their families more easily because “fortunately for them the Negro is a cheerful being.”⁵⁸ And, anyway, whites commonly claimed, neither black men nor black women had strong parental feelings toward their offspring.

Just as masters congratulated themselves on shoring up slave families, so did they boast of the respect they showed for family integrity and spousal and parental rights. When slavery’s critics accused them of taking sexual advantage of their chattels, slave owners huffily dismissed the charges. Among southern whites, James Henry Hammond insisted, “there are fewer cases of divorce, separation,... seduction, rape and bastardy” than among any other population of the same size. “A decided proof” of the masters’ admirable sexual restraint, he added, was the fact that “very few mulattoes are reared on our plantations.”⁵⁹

Hammond’s claim makes his own conduct especially instructive. Six years before he published those proud words, Hammond purchased eighteen-year-old Sally Johnson and her year-old daughter Louisa. Hammond first took Sally to his bed and then, years later, took Louisa as well. Hammond’s son Harry followed suit. In time, both Louisa and Sally bore Hammond’s (or his son’s) children, and those children, too, as a matter of course, became Hammond family property. The elder Hammond counseled the younger not to sell either of those youngsters. Slaves of “my own blood,” he felt, should be owned by