

ECONOMIC HISTORY

Mother of the Domestic Slave Trade

BY KARL RHODES

Virginia's human exports fueled the Deep South's expansion

Delia Garlic was born in Powhatan County, Va., in the 1830s, the height of the domestic slave trade. She was sold, along with her mother and brother, to a speculator who resold them to the highest bidders in Richmond, Va. The sheriff of a nearby county purchased Delia and her mother, but they never again saw Delia's brother.

Delia worked in the sheriff's house, suffering abuse at the hands of his wife and daughter. One night the sheriff came home drunk and flew into a rage at the dinner table. He called an overseer and told him to take Delia outside and beat her. Delia bolted out of the house and into the darkness, but later that night, she followed her mother's voice home.

"Right away they came for me," Delia recalled. "A horse was standing in front of the house, and I was taken that very night to Richmond and sold to a speculator again. I never saw my mammy anymore."

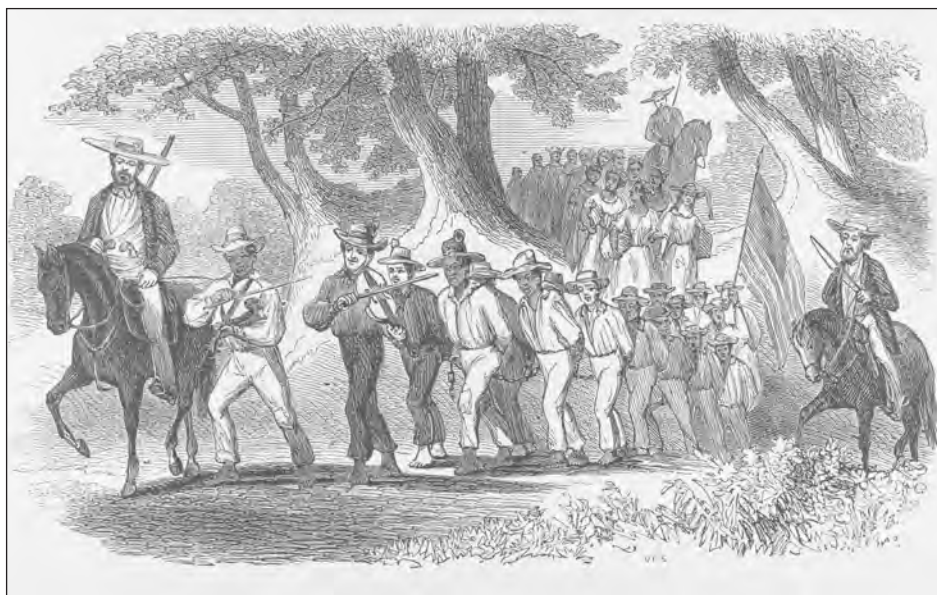
On her second visit to the slave pens of Richmond, Delia was sold to a hotelier from Georgia. After his business failed, she was sold to a planter in Louisiana, where she worked in the cotton fields until the Civil War set her free.

Delia told her story to Margaret Fowler as part of the Federal Writers' Project in the late 1930s. Delia was among approximately 1 million slaves who were forced to migrate from the upper South (mostly Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas) to the Deep South from 1810 to 1860.

"As many as two-thirds of these 1 million or so people were carried south by slave traders, whose daily business resolved the diverging fortunes of the declining upper South and the expanding lower South into mutual benefit," wrote Harvard historian Walter Johnson in *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*.

Slaves were worth substantially more in states such as Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana because labor was the limiting factor of the Deep South's highly profitable agricultural expansion. This dramatic price differential and the declining supply of slaves from the trans-Atlantic trade, which was outlawed in 1808, produced a thriving domestic slave trade in the United States.

"By the 1830s, Virginia's largest export was human property," says Steven Deyle, associate professor of history at the University of Houston and author of *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. Slaves were worth more than the land and, unlike real estate, they were highly portable and easily sold. Many Virginia slaveholders, it seems, knew roughly how much each of their slaves was worth to the speculators who scoured the Virginia countryside offering quick cash for human assets.



"The Coffle Gang," a print by Van Ingen & Snyder, appeared in The Suppressed Book about Slavery, an abolitionist book that was completed in 1857, but not published until 1864. The print depicts slave traders driving 40 men and 30 women through Kentucky toward New Orleans. Slave drivers commonly commanded members of coffles to play musical instruments and sing.

“Master used to say that if we didn’t suit him he would put us in his pocket quick — meaning he would sell us,” recalled William Johnson, a Virginia slave who escaped to Canada. More than the whip, slaves feared being sold south, forever separated from their families, friends, and homes.

The Supply Side

Virginia outlawed the importation of slaves during the American Revolution, but the state’s number of slaves increased steadily from 165,000 in 1776 to 347,000 in 1800. This rapid growth rate continued in the 19th century, prompting abolitionists and others to call Virginia a “breeder” state. Most modern historians find little credible evidence of forced breeding operations, but they note that slave owners in all states routinely encouraged — and sometimes participated in — procreation among their slaves.

By the 1830s, Virginia’s oversupply of forced labor was obvious and widespread, but the issue had been evident in the eastern part of the state for several decades. “George Washington was typical in his frustrations at having ‘more working Negroes by a full moiety, than can be employed to any advantage in the farming system,’” Deyle wrote. (In other words, Washington believed he had twice as many slaves as he needed.) Overplanting of tobacco had exhausted Virginia’s soil, and the price of tobacco had fallen, partly due to new competition in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas. As a result, many Virginia growers transitioned from tobacco to grain crops, which required fewer slaves.

While the rewards of slave labor continued to decline in Virginia, the risks suddenly became more apparent. In 1831, Nat Turner led a slave revolt in Southampton County, Va., killing 59 white people before local militias quashed the insurrection. A few months later, the General Assembly convened a special session to consider gradual emancipation, colonization, and other ways to rid Virginia of its slaves.

James Gholson, a young delegate from Southside Virginia, summed up the pro-slavery argument succinctly, according to Deyle. “Gholson reminded white Virginians that no matter how much they might fear another slave revolt, they no longer had any real choice in the matter. Their state had become too economically dependent upon the institution of slavery to ever give it up, especially through some form of emancipation. He noted that ‘our slaves constitute the largest portion of our wealth, and by their value, regulate the price of nearly all the property we possess.’” Abolition was more palatable to delegates from the state’s western counties, where there were far fewer slaves, but the Virginia House of Delegates ultimately rejected a proposal — by 15 votes — to phase out slavery.

While some Virginia planters debated emancipation and colonization, others simply moved to what was then the Southwest (Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana), taking their slaves with them. This trend accounted for a significant portion of the forced migration, especially in the early years of southwestern expansion. But in later years, selling slaves south became the more prevalent method of forced

migration. Quite often slave trading and planter migration overlapped, notes Edward Baptist, a historian at Cornell University. “If you were brought down south by one owner who immediately sold you to raise cash to expand his operations,” then that sale was essentially part of the interstate slave trade.

Some paternalistic planters refused to sell slaves under any circumstance, while others claimed to sell slaves only when they had little choice. “Slaveholders always had some reason for selling a slave — an estate to divide, a debt to pay, a transgression to punish, a threat to abate,” Walter Johnson wrote. “What they rarely had when they sold a slave, it seems from the accounts they gave of themselves, was any direct responsibility for their own actions.” Instead, they blamed the evils of the trade on their favorite scapegoats — the lewd, crude slave traders. But the size and scope of the domestic slave trade — in bad times and in good times — explodes the myth of benevolent masters who sold slaves only with great reluctance. University of Liverpool historian Michael Tadman estimated that from the 1830s through the 1850s, slave owners’ sales to traders in the upper South generated receipts equivalent to between 15 percent and 20 percent of receipts from the region’s staple crops.

As slave prices soared to all-time highs in the 1850s, slave speculation became widely accepted in the upper South as a necessary evil to protect the region’s economic interests. Colorado State University historian Robert Gudmestad observed in his 2003 book, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*, that “the need for the trade conquered most slaveholders’ qualms about the negative consequences of the peculiar institution.”

The Demand Side

A number of factors drove up demand for slaves in the Deep South in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Agricultural innovations, most notably the cotton gin, and surging international demand for cotton greatly enhanced returns to investment in slaves on cotton plantations. While this was happening, the United States purchased the Louisiana territory in 1803 and outlawed the trans-Atlantic slave trade five years later. The rapidly expanding nation then began to push American Indians westward, making more land available for cotton cultivation.

The soil and climate of the Deep South were ideally suited to growing cotton, especially in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Cotton production was labor intensive, so the domestic slave traders began moving slaves there — slowly at first, but quite rapidly as cotton prices recovered following the Panic of 1819.

In addition to field hands for cotton, there was strong demand for “sturdy adult males” to work the sugar plantations of Louisiana. Those plantations often were supplied via markets in Baltimore, Alexandria, Va., Norfolk, Va., and especially Richmond.

There also was lascivious demand for attractive young female slaves with light brown skin. These “fancy maids” or

“fancy girls” often were raped by traders and sold in New Orleans to work as sex slaves — either in brothels or for exclusive exploitation by owners who paid up to \$7,000 to flaunt their wealth, power, and audacity.

Compared with the number of slaves purchased for cotton production, the number of slaves purchased for sex was very small, Baptist concedes, but it was “significant in terms of the way it injected sexuality into all of the discussions of female slaves who were for sale,” he says. “Men for sale were always being discussed in terms of their labor capacity. Women were usually discussed with some reference to their physical attractiveness.”

Deep South planters also viewed slaves as objects of finance. They frequently secured loans with human collateral, as did planters in the upper South. After the demise of the Second Bank of the United States, which had provided substantial funding for slave trading and cotton expansion, upstart banks in the Southwest offered easy credit to planters based on the number of slaves they could mortgage. The banks packaged these loans into mortgage-backed securities that they sold to banks in London, Amsterdam, and New York. London-based Baring Brothers, the leading merchant bank of the day, even persuaded the Louisiana legislature to guarantee the bonds.

“It really seemed that these bonds were risk-free for the immediate lender and the immediate borrower,” Baptist says. “They were virtually identical to mortgage bonds as we know them in more recent times, and the outcome was very similar.”

The confluence of easy credit, abundant land, and a steady supply of slaves eventually led to overproduction of cotton, and when cotton prices collapsed, “nobody was able to make the interest payments on their mortgage loans, which meant the banks couldn’t make the interest payments

on their bonds,” Baptist says. “And that was, as far as I can tell, the cause of the Panic of 1837.”

The Middle Men

Planters from Mississippi often made buying trips to Virginia, where they could purchase slaves one-third to one-half cheaper than in the Southwest, according to Joseph Ingraham, a self-described “Yankee” who wrote *The South-West*, a book about his experiences in Mississippi and Louisiana in the 1830s.

Some planters in the upper South offered discounts to fellow planters, relative to the prices they charged slave traders, so speculators sometimes posed as Deep South planters. Upper South slave owners assumed they could easily distinguish between a genteel Southern planter and an uncouth slave trader, but often there was not much difference.

A slave trader is “very much like other men. He is today a plain farmer with 20 or 30 slaves endeavoring to earn a few dollars from the worn-out land,” Ingraham wrote. “He is in debt and hears he can sell his slaves in Mississippi for twice their value in his own state.” So the farmer drives his slaves, and perhaps a few of his neighbor’s slaves, to the Southwest. “He finds it profitable; and if his inclinations prompt him, he will return home, after selling his slaves, and buy, with ready money, from his neighbors, a few here and a few there, until he has a sufficient number to make another caravan.”

These caravans, or “coffles,” were common sights in Virginia. They ranged from 10 to 300 slaves who traveled about 20 miles per day. The male slaves typically were shackled two abreast with a long chain or rope running down the middle of their column tying all their shackles together. The women were bound by ropes, if at all, and some traders and planters allowed women, children, and sick or injured men to ride in wagons.

The Devil’s Half Acre

In the 1850s, slave trading thrived in Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom, just a few blocks from Capitol Square.

Most of the trading occurred not in public auctions but in slave pens run by resident dealers. Historically, Robert Lumpkin is the most infamous of these Richmond dealers. In addition to trading slaves himself, he owned and operated Lumpkin’s Jail — also known as “the devil’s half acre” — on Richmond’s “Wall Street.”

At the end of the Civil War, as the Confederate government was fleeing Richmond, Lumpkin tried to put one last shipment of 50 slaves on a train to Danville, Va., according to an account given by abolitionist Charles Coffin in his memoir, *The Boys of ’61*.

“This sad and weeping 50, in handcuffs and chains, was the last slave coffle that shall tread the soil of America,” Coffin wrote triumphantly. They were “trampling the bonds of the Confederate States of America in the mire, as they

marched to the station.” The coffle made it to the depot, but sentinels guarding the train turned them back because the cars were reserved for Confederate officials and government documents. What happened next is uncertain, but presumably Lumpkin’s last coffle went free after Union forces took control of the city.

Lumpkin died in 1866 and willed his former slave-trading complex to Mary, a light-skinned slave he had purchased and eventually married. In 1867, Mary leased the complex to the American Baptist Home Mission Society, which converted it into a school for former slaves that evolved into Virginia Union University. In an 1895 history of the school, James Simmons, a leader of the Baptist society, recalled his visit to the converted complex after the Civil War.

“The old slave pen,” he wrote, “was no longer ‘the devil’s half acre’ but God’s half acre.”

—KARL RHODES

During the 1820s, Virginia's domestic slave trade evolved from a loosely organized network of itinerate traders into a leading example of America's market revolution. Major trading centers emerged in Richmond, Washington, Baltimore, and Norfolk. From these centers, slaves could be shipped around Florida on specially outfitted sailing vessels and later on steamers that could reach New Orleans in 19 days. Large slave-trading organizations also emerged. Alexandria-based Franklin and Armfield, the biggest of these firms, kept its ships moving from November to April, picking up slaves in Richmond and Baltimore and taking them to depots in New Orleans and Natchez, Miss. Traders continued to use overland routes because they were cheaper, but time was money, and in the 1840s and 1850s, traders increasingly took slaves south on trains. The quicker the traders could deliver one coffle of slaves, the sooner they could pay their bankers, borrow more money, and assemble another coffle. So Richmond's growing rail connections to the lower South enhanced the city's position as the upper South's largest slave market.

"The domestic slave trade was not simply a consequence of the [market revolution] but a central component in propelling it," Deyle wrote. In addition to employing the latest modes of transportation, slave traders rapidly adopted new business practices, such as newspaper advertising, standardized pricing, and international finance.

The most sophisticated traders even managed to elevate themselves socially above the employees and agents who did their bidding. Partners Isaac Franklin and John Armfield, for example, used their enormous wealth to "distance themselves from the foul odor of speculation," Gudmestad concluded. Franklin married into a "respectable" Nashville family, and Armfield "was instrumental in establishing the University of the South at Sewanee."

Most slave traders, however, remained the pariahs of Southern society. They deserved their reputations for greed-fueled cruelty, but they created neither supply nor demand. They simply facilitated the movement of slaves from willing sellers in the upper South to eager buyers in the lower South.

"The rhetoric of the evil slave trader enabled Southerners to explain a problematic aspect of their society: the cruel treatment of slaves," Gudmestad wrote. "Once speculators were to blame for the worst abuses of slavery, Southerners could remain committed to the institution as a whole."

The Movie Version

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Southerners struggled to make sense of the massive loss of life and property. "Unfortunately, making sense of it meant recasting it," explains Christy Coleman, president of the American Civil War Center in Richmond. "Wasn't it romantic? Wasn't it wonderful? Wasn't it cool? And the rest of America got sucked up in it."

Between 1875 and 1900, there was a concerted effort to reunite the country, Deyle adds. "There was this decision — conscious or unconscious — by white Americans to forget about it all and let white Southerners write what they wanted to believe and what they wanted the rest of the country to believe. So they retold the story by sort of ignoring what the real cause of the war was, and slavery didn't get talked about."

The cover-up was perpetuated in part by plantation romance novels, which sold more copies in the North than in the South, Deyle notes. While Margaret Fowler was interviewing former slave Delia Garlic, Margaret Mitchell was receiving rave reviews for *Gone with the Wind*. Fowler's true story gathered dust in the Library of Congress, while Mitchell's fanciful fiction won a Pulitzer Prize and 10 Academy Awards.

Misleading images of Old South slavery persist today, but in recent years, historians have replaced the myths of benevolent masters and happy slaves with candid accounts of how the domestic slave trade callously connected the economic interests of the upper South with those of the lower South. Tearing apart families and selling people south clearly troubled some slave owners, but they did it anyway, Coleman says. "We are talking about people's pocketbooks, and I hate to say it, but greed is greed is greed." **EF**

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