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Unrequited Toil

A History of United States Slavery

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The growth of cotton marched in lockstep with the geopolitics of slavery, and both were part of an aggressive US expansion policy. In the 1783 Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War, Britain recognized US land claims all the way to the Mississippi River, with Spain claiming land south and west of Georgia at about 32 degrees of northern latitude, or where the Tombigbee joins the Alabama River. Spain also claimed Florida. Despite American and European claims, however, lands west of the Appalachians were still governed by Native American nations and confederations such as the Muscogee-Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. The Jefferson administration began pressuring southeastern Indians to vacate lands sought by American citizens. In the meantime, the biggest obstacle to US growth west of the Appalachian Mountains was the port of New Orleans on the Mississippi River.

New Orleans was the key to the western regions of what became the cotton kingdom. And it was controlled by a hostile European power. "There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy," Thomas Jefferson wrote, contemplating

[2] Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 1026; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440–1870* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 571.

[3] Angela Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

an alliance with the British against the French to whom Spain ceded the port. The exports of states bordering the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers as well as the Mississippi River ran though New Orleans. Spain took control of Louisiana in 1763, including New Orleans, and in 1795, the United States negotiated free passage on the Mississippi River. In 1800, Spain ceded Louisiana to France in the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso and with it control of the vital port. Before France took it over, Spanish officials closed the port to US trade in October 1802, while American diplomats in Paris were trying to buy New Orleans. As with the cotton business, however, the revolution in Haiti played havoc with French colonial plans.[4]

The Haitian Revolution was the largest slave rebellion in modern history, and by 1802, it had become an independence struggle after French First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte attempted to reestablish slavery there. Napoleon sent a massive force to conquer Haiti. But in the summer and fall of 1802, French troops fell to yellow fever and the uncompromising strategy of nationalist leaders like Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Dessalines fought against slavery and white rule. Atrocities were rampant on all sides. But the Haitian rout of the French convinced Napoleon to sell not just New Orleans but all French Louisiana and, if possible, to use the proceeds to salvage his imperial project in Europe and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

To the Thomas Jefferson administration, this meant additional cotton lands. "I know that cotton is the most profitable production of the US. and that the Missisipi [*sic*] territory is well adapted to it," Thomas Jefferson wrote in March 1802.[5] Not waiting for Congress to act, Jefferson ramped up negotiations with Napoleon's ministers to secure New Orleans and as much of Spanish Florida as could be had (Jefferson believing at the time that Spain had ceded Florida to France). He was surprised by the turn in negotiations in the spring of 1803 in which France agreed to sell all of the Louisiana territory to the United States. After French officials agreed on a price, American officials financed the purchase with a cash outlay and $11.25 million in US government bonds. British banking firm Baring Brothers and Company handled the deal, mortgaging Louisiana to the

[4] Jefferson quoted in Robert D. Bush, *The Louisiana Purchase: A Global Context* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 148.

[5] Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, March 12, 1802, Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration, online: http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-37-02-0042, accessed: June 3, 2017.

United States in part through a Dutch affiliate. The acquisition doubled US territory, including the lands of future Missouri and Kansas, flashpoints of conflict over slavery's expansion.

In the fall of 1803, Americans took control of New Orleans, boosted trade, and started carving up plantation lands up the Mississippi and the Red River in Louisiana. The result soon became clear: New Orleans quickly became a hub of America's cotton empire and its biggest slave market. Cotton and sugar planters turned Jefferson's empire of liberty into an empire of slavery in the lower Mississippi Valley after Haiti secured independence in 1804.

In founding the Haitian republic, the second independent republic in the Americas, Haiti's leaders repudiated slavery and the very calculations that framed US expansion in the lower Mississippi Valley. One irony of slavery's geopolitics in the United States is that the American slave country grew in response to the determined emancipationist struggles led by rebel leader Toussaint L'Overture and President Dessalines. Declining Caribbean cotton production gave the United States advantages, while plummeting sugar production in the midst of the rebellion provided an opening to Louisiana growers whose fortunes would rise in the 1820s. Despite the Haitian commitment to liberty and ending racial inequalities, however, the Jefferson administration worked to isolate Haiti. Enslavers feared its contagion of liberty would spread to bondspersons in North America at precisely the time they were growing in economic importance.[6] About the time of the Louisiana Purchase, Charles Ball followed many black Marylanders on an African American trail of tears to cotton country. His ordeal traces the process of cotton's rise.

Charles Ball opened his eyes on a landscape in upheaval. Born in Maryland in 1781, he grew up farming tobacco and corn in southern Maryland. Like so many, his family fractured after his mother's owner died in debt. "We were all sold on the same day to different purchasers," Ball recalled. "Our new masters took us away, and I never saw my mother, nor any of my brothers and sisters afterwards." He witnessed Georgia and Carolina slave traders spirit off the children, while a new owner kept him in the region. Ball's father "never recovered from the effects of the shock which this sudden and overwhelming ruin of his family gave him."[7] Ball's

[6] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[7] Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave under Various Masters, and Was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, during the Late War* (New York, NY: John S. Taylor, 1837), 16–21; Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

siblings were sold to make cotton. He would follow, cotton exercising what seems like a gravitational pull on bondspersons.

Ball was about twenty when he was sold and shackled with fifty-one others and force-marched away from his wife, Judah, and their children. In chains, he walked south by southwest, crossing one big river after another, the Potomac, the Roanoke, the Catawba, and so on, viewing the ominous signs of what was to come. "I had now no hope of ever again seeing my wife and children," he mourned, "or of revisiting the scenes of my youth." Despair led to thoughts of suicide.[8]

But he was resilient and determined to remember the geography he crossed and those whom he encountered. Ball reached the Congaree River in South Carolina where enslavers were importing bondspersons like himself, plucked from American families and Africans newly disembarked from the Middle Passage, so great was the demand. "I became intimately acquainted with some of these men," Ball recalled, among whom were Muslims. "There was one man on this plantation, who prayed five times every day, always turning his face to the east, when in the performance of his devotion."[9] Ball memorized the story of one West African captive he met in South Carolina. "More than one-third of us died on the passage," across the Atlantic, the man told Ball, "and when we arrived at Charleston, I was not able to stand. It was more than a week after I left the ship, before I could straighten my limbs. I was bought by a trader, with several others; brought up the country, and sold to our present master. I have been here five years."[10] He joined African Americans like Ball in the cotton fields.

Every African-descended person, it seemed, was making cotton. "The labour usually performed by slaves, on a cotton plantation, does not require great bodily strength," Ball observed, "but rather superior agility, and wakefulness."[11] Enslavers demanded bondspersons' attentiveness and nimbleness, and under coercion cotton pickers performed a melancholy dance through the long furrows, collecting the white lint from sharp bolls, the cotton plants' natural defenses competing against the skill and dexterity of the pickers. Child labor was prized because it was cheap and pliable, but all worked alongside one another in a cotton gang.

[8] Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 69.

[9] Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 164.

[10] Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 186.

[11] Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 210.

And Ball soon discovered the secret to cotton's profitability: the violence of the pushing system. "Flogging – though often severe and excruciating in Maryland, is not practised with the order, regularity, and system, to which it is reduced in the south," he argued.[12] Enslavers made whipping into a science, fashioning long whips counterweighted at the handle, often with lead. This high-technology "whipping-machine" was simultaneously an instrument of torture and a strategy for raising worker productivity. With the cotton gin already saving labor, enslaved cotton productivity rose fourfold between 1800 and 1860, about the same as the productivity of cotton spinners in Manchester cotton mills between 1819 and 1860. The crucial difference was human- versus power-driven equipment. While American enslavers developed whipping technology, Manchester mills were fitted with increasingly complex machines.[13] Augmenting torture was improved crop science, including cotton varieties of *G. hirsutum*, which yielded more lint per boll and hardier plants.[14] But enslavers calculated that the greatest returns could be had by regimenting violence.

Overseers implemented a quota system with carrots and with sticks, dividing ostensible gang labor into individual production targets. On his first day in the field, Ball picked thirty-eight pounds as an inexperienced hand, younger workers picking twice as much. But he learned quickly under the whip. "I looked forward to something still more painful than loss of character which I must sustain," he recalled, "for I knew that the lash of the overseer would soon become familiar with my back, if I did not perform as much work as any of the other young men." He picked forty-six pounds the next day and fifty-two after that. And taking stock of how much the best workers were able to average, "the overseer told us, that he fixed the day[']s work at fifty pounds; and that all those who picked more than that, would be paid a cent a pound, for the overplus." Anything short of that would earn a whipping, administered while the worker was spread chest-down on the ground, females exposed to sexual humiliation as well as torture. "Twenty-five pounds was assigned as the daily task of the old people," Ball recalled, "as well as a number of boys and girls, whilst some of the women, who had children, were required to pick forty pounds, and

[12] Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 59.

[13] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014), 141 (quotation); chap. 4.

[14] Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, *Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 4.

several children had ten pounds each as their task."[15] Under such a system, if a mother helped her child, she would be whipped for not meeting her quota. And when bondspersons met those quotas, owners and overseers tended to raise them.

The regime was relentless, and new arrivals like Ball faced severe hardships acclimating. Depending on the climate, cotton-picking could start in August and continue into the next year. Cotton ripened in stages, and plants that furnished cotton in late summer could be picked again in early fall and then in late fall or early winter according to the variety and climate. Enslavers prized cream-colored lint that was not discolored by parasite or environmental damage and had been ginned to keep the fibers intact and with only a minimum of dirt and debris. They tasked overseers with stern discipline in the fields, at the cotton gins, and in the warehouses.

The pushing system in the fields was a ruthless part of cotton supply chain management. Southern planters took great financial risks on cotton. Upfront costs were high, including land and labor. Unlike free labor employers, slave owners paid labor costs before the work was done when they purchased a bondsperson. Enslavers were often debt-burdened to start with, and they assumed additional financial risks, including insurance and shipping costs. They owned cotton bales all the way to market in far-off cities. Cotton merchants called factors typically advanced a planter 70 percent of the expected sale price when it was delivered, but if the bales were damaged or lost, or if the cotton market took a tumble, the planter could end up owing back part of that advance, much of which paid mortgages on lands and slaves anyway. Planters talked a game of gentility and paternalism, but their calculations of profit and advantage fell hard on African Americans whom they pushed to plant, tend, pick, gin, and bale cotton. Any planter who did not implement the pushing system risked a competitive disadvantage against one who did. Torture became part of cotton's business model. And if the planter failed or the market crashed, bondspersons were in danger of being sold.

Ball worked under the pushing system for several years, slowly integrating into the new social environment. He held on to hope of reuniting with his family in Maryland, but escape was not simple. Owners and overseers were like human barbed wire. Plantations were part of an incarceration regime, a carceral landscape as mean as any prison. Overseers were the guards and sometimes the executioners. But there

[15] Ball, *Slavery in the United States* (quotations); Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, chap. 4.

were invisible barriers to leaving as well. Bondspersons formed families, rebuilding social capital, and if they escaped, they lost their relatives, their networks, and large portions of their selfhood. Yet there were many factors pushing Ball to escape. Besides toiling under a whip, Ball was constantly hungry, poorly clothed and sheltered, and subject to pests like hornets, mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, and hazards like thickets of razor-edged saw grass that plagued the fields.

The work regime was one of constant disruption. Ball was transferred from slave labor camp to slave labor camp, working on the plantation of one of his owner's daughters before the owner died and he decided he'd had enough of slavery in South Carolina. It was 1809, a year after the United States prohibited the foreign slave trade to domestic shores. Fearing betrayal, Ball told no one he planned to escape. He fled one night, walking back to Maryland, keeping to the woods, crossing the rivers, eating corn ripening in the fields. After rejoining a wife who scarcely remembered him and children who greeted him as a stranger, Ball tried to rebuild his life in Maryland. But it was a turbulent time in the nation's history. Soon the United States was again at war with Great Britain.

When British warships arrived in the Chesapeake, Charles Ball joined what some have called a second war for American independence in the War of 1812. And like the struggles of the Jefferson administration to expand the cotton and slave country, the principal outcomes of the war in the South was a victory for enslavers and the conquest of land from southeastern Indians. This was not the full intent of Congress when it declared war in 1812 over the issue of British navy impressment of American sailors and the capture of US ships and cargo by both the British and the French. But when American forces under General Andrew Jackson moved south from Tennessee, they marched into a civil war between two Creek factions.

Cotton land taken from Creeks was a major outcome of the War of 1812. The flashpoint for American involvement in the Creek civil war was the Fort Mims Massacre. On August 30, 1813, Red Sticks – the traditionalist faction among the Muscogee-Creek Confederation – attacked a hastily constructed stockade on a plantation in the Mississippi Territory (present-day south Alabama). The force of 700 overwhelmed the local militia, killing 250 of the fort's defenders and then another 100 or so civilians. Reports of the massacre became a rallying cry for Americans, some of whom saw inter-Indian alliances as part of a larger alliance with the British. Andrew Jackson suspected that this internal

enemy was allied with an external one. Using that pretext, his forces moved against the Red Sticks, culminating in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in March 1814. Jackson's forces won, and he demanded the Creeks cede some 23 million acres in Alabama to the United States. The context was cotton. And the Treaty of Fort Jackson was a major American victory for enslavers who were already pressuring Indians to vacate lands on which short-staple cotton grew well.

American victory in the War of 1812 reestablished enslavers' supremacy. Jackson led Tennessee and Kentucky riflemen, former Haitian bondsmen fighting as free men, New Orleans militiamen, and even Creole pirates against the British Army in January 1815. Together they won the Battle of New Orleans. Then news arrived that the United States and Britain had already agreed to peace in December 1814. Nevertheless, Jackson rose in the estimation of his countrymen, and the message was clear to both Indians and Europeans that Americans of Jackson's stripe would ruthlessly defend the gains secured in the war. Enslavers clamped down on bondspersons, many of whom had fled to the British. And under the pretext of pursuing British dead-enders and fugitive slaves, Jackson stayed in the saddle, pursuing fugitives from slavery.

The victory against the British at New Orleans was also a victory for trade with the British. Before the War of 1812, the Thomas Jefferson and James Madison administrations tried to maintain American neutrality by banning US exports, first with the Embargo Act of 1807. But such restrictions hurt domestic merchants, shippers, and enslavers. The federal government briefly hampered the cotton trade. But the Jefferson and Madison embargoes made many exporters into smugglers. Following passage of the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809, for instance, some 270 US vessels set sail, illegally unloading 65,000 bales of cotton in Liverpool, England, between early June and late August, representing about 41 percent of the 1808 US crop.[16] Intermittent smuggling followed, even during wartime. After the war ended, American ships sailed for England with more cotton than ever before. And Americans bought cheap British textiles, salt, and coal. They were soon importing credit too.

[16] Sydney G. Checkland, "American Versus West Indian Traders in Liverpool, 1793–1815," *Journal of Economic History* 18.2 (June 1958): 155; James L. Watkins, *King Cotton: A Historical and Statistical Review, 1790 to 1908* (New York, NY: James L. Watkins and Sons, 1908), 29.