12-1 | Reporting on the South’s Peculiar Institution
ETHAN ANDREWS, Slavery and the Domestic Slave-Trade (1836)

While the Constitution ended the importation of slaves beginning in 1808, a thriving internal (or domestic) trade in slaves continued. Treated as property, enslaved African Americans became a tradable commodity and source of wealth for southern planters. As moveable property, slaves were useful to planters who left exhausted farms in search of more fertile fields in the Gulf coast states. As a professor of ancient languages at the University of North Carolina, Ethan Andrews (1787-1858) observed first-hand the effects of slavery and the slave trade. At the behest of the American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race, he published in 1836 a series of letters recounting his observations.

Fredericksburg, July 26, 1835.

A gentleman in this city has a female slave whom he purchased from a trader, for the purpose of preventing her separation from her husband. Her former mistress had taken some offence at her, and had sold her to the trader, with the intention of having her carried out of the state. The husband and wife were both greatly distressed, and from compassion to them this gentleman purchased her. After this trouble was over, a year or two passed quietly away, when suddenly the husband, who had belonged to the minor heirs of an estate, was seized, just as a drove of negroes were setting off for the south, and immediately hand-cuffed to prevent his escape. He had been sold some little time previously, but had not been informed of his fate, until the hour of departure arrived. The gentleman who had purchased the wife, learning the circumstances, attempted again to prevent the separation of the husband and wife, by offering to sell the latter to the trader, provided he would guarantee that they should not be separated, when sold at the south. The trader was willing to purchase her, but said he could give no such guaranty, as he always sold his slaves to those who would pay the highest price, and he supposed it possible, that for this purpose he should have to separate them. Under these circumstances, the husband, who was much attached to his wife, begged her not to leave her present situation, and thus they were finally separated.

A friend, to whom and to whose family I am indebted for many attentions, considers the final extinction of slavery as decisively indicated by the treatment which slaves now receive in the south, and particularly in Virginia, when compared with that which was common twenty or thirty years since. Even the advertisements for runaway slaves would serve to indicate a change in public sentiment, and in fact, as the same gentleman observes, are collectively a good index of the state of feeling, not only at the same place at different periods, but in

different places at the same time. A Virginia advertisement usually contains a clause, stating, or implying, that the slave has run away, notwithstanding he has always been treated with the greatest indulgence; while advertisements from the extreme south are solely occupied, like those for stray oxen and horses, in describing their natural and artificial marks, their ages and habits.

He thinks, also, that in this state, slaves would have no value whatever as field-hands, were it not for the southern market. The labor performed by them is not sufficient to meet the current expenses of the plantations, at least of the more ordinary ones, and the only profit of the planter is derived from the negroes whom he raises for market.

It remains still to be determined whether, if wages were paid to the slaves in place of their present regular supplies, and in proportion to the amount of services rendered, a different result would not be obtained. That this experiment will soon be made, I have great confidence, and am inclined to believe that, if judiciously made, it will succeed.

Richmond, July 28, 1835.

In my journey yesterday from Fredericksburg to this place, I travelled with a planter, who had emigrated from North Carolina to Louisiana, where he has resided for several years, but is now about to remove from his plantation to a more healthy one in a different part of the same state. His present journey was undertaken partly for the purpose of increasing the number of his slaves; and he had just completed the purchase of one hundred and fifty-five, the entire stock of a plantation near Fredericksburg. For these he had given seventy-five thousand dollars, or about five hundred dollars, on an average, for each. They included mechanics of every kind necessary upon a great plantation. The purchaser was still young, and exhibited, in a striking degree, that promptitude and decision of character, so often observable in those accustomed early to direct their own conduct and that of others. Visions, perhaps I ought rather to say sober calculations, of boundless wealth, to be acquired by the labor of his slaves, were alluring him forward, and though naturally humane in his feelings, his kindness to the slaves will probably go no farther than to provide for their animal wants, regardless of their high destinies as moral and intelligent beings. He was not wholly without apprehension that his hopes of soon acquiring a vast fortune might be frustrated by a fall in the price of his staple productions, cotton. He remarked that he should soon pay for his slaves, if the present price of cotton continued; and that he should ultimately succeed, if it did not fall below twelve and a half, or even ten cents, but that he could not afford to go below that price.

He represents the cares of the master upon an extensive plantation as very great. These are much increased in case of sickness among the slaves, as they cannot in general be depended upon to nurse one another, and the whole care of them while sick often devolves upon the master. He says “their weekly rations in Louisiana consist of eight or ten quarts of corn meal and four pounds of northern pork; for the latter of which, in the winter, bacon is commonly given to them, and molasses also is frequently substituted for the whole or a part of the pork, at the
rate of a pint of the former for a pound of the latter. Some make use of salt fish instead of pork; but this is generally thought objectionable, on account of its tendency to create violent thirst. The negroes commonly choose to receive their corn-meal, rather than its equivalent in bread, that they may cook it for themselves. Rations of spirits are never given to them, except upon peculiar and rare occasions, as at corn shucking, and the like. It is therefore extremely rare that a negro is seen intoxicated, and still more so that he acquires a habit of intemperance."

To the inquiry, how do the slaves in Louisiana usually spend the Sabbath? he replied: "generally in complete idleness; lolling in the shade, or basking in the sun. Some of them are disposed to go to preaching, when there is an opportunity; but the greater part consider it a hardship to be compelled to attend meeting. They are universally attached to the Baptist, rather than to any other church, and seem to consider 'going into the water,' as a most essential part of religion. This, he observes, 'may perhaps be attributed in part to its involving an act of self-denial, as they are doggedly averse to bathing or washing, for the purposes of cleanliness.' This indisposition to practise ablutions for the promotion of health and cleanliness, is nearly universal, and they can scarcely be more offended by anything, than by a compulsory system of bathing or of washing their clothes. If not compelled to do it, they would never wash a garment from the time when it is put on new, until it is worn out. Even house servants must be watched like children, or most of them would neglect attention to cleanliness.

"Whatever indulgences, in regard to dress or other things, custom has established, as the right of the slave, he is very particular to require; and if anything is withheld, he remembers it as his due, and asks for it, when he has an opportunity.

"The slave-traders have exacted such a profit upon their slaves, that the planters, when intending to make a considerable purchase, either come to the north for the purpose, or employ a factor to whom they allow a stipulated commission on the purchase money. By such means only, can they prevent the combinations among the traders, to keep up the prices, as the infamy of the traffic operates to prevent great competition."

A gentleman from Halifax N.C. represents the slaves as rapidly diminishing in that part of the state, by their removal to Alabama, and other southern states. In most cases, the masters emigrate with their slaves..."

Baltimore, July 30, 1835.

To a stranger, one of the most revolting features in American slavery is, the domestic slave-trade; and hence the inquiry is so frequently made, whether this evil at least may not be abolished. Various plans have been proposed for the purpose, but none which appear feasible; and it may well be doubted, whether this feature can ever be obliterated while the general system remains. All which it appears possible to do, is to regulate the sales in such a manner, that husbands and wives, parents and young children, shall never be separated. This, no one can deny, ought to be done; and if the system cannot exist with this innovation, it ought not to be tolerated for a single hour. The domestic relations are at the
foundation of all the virtue, and consequently of all the happiness of society, and everything inconsistent with the perpetuity of these relations ought at once, everywhere, and forever, to cease. But whether even this is practicable, is a question which I confess my inability to answer. I cannot see how these separations are to be prevented, while the husband is the property of one master, and the wife and children of another, each master being wholly independent, and his slaves being considered as in the most absolute sense his property. The mode of accomplishing this change belongs to southern moralists to determine; but it is not a subject which they are at liberty to neglect, and least of all, can the christian, who acts in view of his Master’s command not to separate those whom God has joined in the marriage relation, consent that such separations should be legalized by the laws of a state of which he is an active and responsible member.

When these relations are not violated, the character of the domestic slave-trade, considered as a part of the general system of slavery, depends upon the circumstances under which the transfer is made. If the condition of the slave is improved in everything essential, and especially if, with a full understanding of the nature of the transaction, he really desires the transfer, no additional wrong appears to be done by the new relation in which the parties are placed. This case, so far from being uncommon, is one which frequently occurs.

A literary friend who is a native of North Carolina, remarked to me to-day, that he could tolerate every thing else about slavery better than the shocking separations, which he saw continually caused by the removal of slaves to the south and west. When I told him that the evil seemed inseparable from slavery in such a country as this, he reluctantly assented to the position, after a moment’s hesitation, in a manner that seemed to me little short of ludicrous. My meaning had been, that a system, to which such evils were necessary incidents, was intolerable; his conclusion evidently was, that if it cannot be made better, it must be submitted to with all its inconveniences.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What evidence does Andrews’s report provide for understanding both the domestic trade in slaves and the geographical movement of southern planters?

2. How does knowing that an advocacy group organized for the “relief and improvement of the colored race” commissioned Andrews’s work impact how a historian might interpret the evidence it contains?
12-3 | A Southern City Affirms the Morality of the Slave Trade

Proceedings of the Charleston City Council (1856)

The coastal city of Charleston, South Carolina, became a thriving commercial center during the first half of the nineteenth century, buoyed by its flourishing trade in cotton and slaves. The domestic trade in slaves was a lucrative source of city income. Those bringing slaves into the city for sale were subject to a head tax of $10 per slave. Benjamin Mordecai, a Jewish merchant from Charleston who became a leading financial supporter of the Confederate cause, petitioned the city council for exemption. His petition was rejected, but the city's aldermen, as reported in the January 10, 1856, Charleston Daily Courier, took the opportunity to affirm the propriety of the tax and the trade in slaves.

Alderman Gourdin, from the Committee of Ways and Means, made the following report, which was adopted:

The Committee of Ways and Means, to whom was referred the memorial of Benjamin Mordecai, Esq., asking relief in the matter of an ordinance of the City Council requiring a tax of ten dollars on each slave brought into the city for sale from beyond the limits of the State, beg leave to report:

The ordinance for raising supplies for the years 1851, 1852 and 1853, provides that every slave brought into the city for sale, from beyond the limits of the State, shall be subjected to a tax of $3. Those for the same objects for the years 1854 and 1855 placed this tax at $10. The memorialist recites two points of objection to this provision of the ordinance of 1855—the first founded upon the operation of the law upon him individually; the second upon the impolicy of the law, alleging that it operates as a commercial restraint.

On the first point, the memorialist alleges that the actual enforcement of this ordinance has been waived; that all others in the same business with himself have been charged to this time according to such rates as were in existence prior to its passage; that it seems to be only against him that the enforcement was directed, to his individual hardship and suffering; that all others having escaped this tax, he prays in his behalf a similar exemption; and he further asks an opportunity that he may show that all others in the same business with himself have been exempted.

The ordinance provides “that it shall be the duty of the City Assessor to ascertain the number of all such slaves and to assess the said tax on the owners, or persons in possession of such slaves, for the purpose of sale, &c.”

The Committee have communicated with the memorialist and with the City Assessor on the subject, and from the statements of the former, are induced to believe that the tax of $10 on each slave brought into the city for sale from beyond the limits of the State, has not been uniformly paid by others in the same business with himself. The Assessor on the other hand, alleges the difficulty of

discovering the particular negroes on sale in the city brought from beyond the limits of the State, and his dependence upon Brokers and others to make the return required by the Ordinance; that if this tax has not been uniformly levied, it is because of his failure to detect the particular cases of such negroes being on sale, and because of the neglect or avoidance of parties in such instances to comply with the law. The Assessor further alleges that in no case or cases known to him has the party been exempted from the payment of this tax, and that when levied, subsequent to the passage of the Ordinance of 1854, he has acted under the provisions of this Ordinance, and not according to those previously in force. The Committee are of opinion that the failure or neglect of an officer, to compel parties (in previous cases) to comply with the law, and that the failure by others, through ignorance, or from any other cause, to comply with the law, constitute no valid grounds for suspending its operation in ascertained cases, to which it is strictly applicable. They therefore recommend that the prayer of the memorialist be not granted, and that the City Assessor be instructed to assess this tax on such parties as are now known to him, or may become known to him, as having sold slaves in the city from beyond the limits of the State without having paid the same. The Committee might here conclude their report without advertting to the second point of objection; the policy of the law, leaving this to be discussed when their bill for raising supplies shall be under consideration; but this topic having been introduced to public attention by the memorialist, they propose to give it a cursory and a brief review.

The Committee apprehend that this community entertains no morbid or fanatical sentiment on the subject of slavery. The discussions of the last twenty years have lead it to clear and decided opinions as to its complete consistency with moral principle, and with the highest order of civilization. It regards the removal of slaves from place to place, and their transfer from master to master, by gift, purchase or otherwise, as incidents necessarily connected with the institution. The law has refrained (and wisely, perhaps,) from defining the manner in which these rights of ownership may be exercised, leaving the usages in reference to them to the dictation and control of an intelligent and humane public sentiment. To apply these remarks. The statute law of Georgia makes it a penal offence to import into that State slaves for sale or speculation. The offender is guilty of a high misdemeanor, and the conviction, therefore, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding $500, for each and every slave so brought into that State, and by imprisonment and labor in the Penitentiary for any time not less than one year, nor longer than four years; and persons knowingly purchasing or recovering slaves so brought into Georgia, are also guilty of a high misdemeanor, and shall be fined in a sum not exceeding $500, for each slave so illegally imported. The effect of this stringent law, in force in a neighboring and a border State, was to make Charleston a mart for the sale of slaves, drawn from the slave States lying to the north of us. This community has not forgotten, that previous to the passage of the ordinance of 1854, imposing this tax of $10, it was thought a common spectacle to see troupes of slaves, of all ages, and of both sexes, uniformly dressed, paraded for air, exercise and exhibition, through our streets and thoroughfares.
This spectacle of a large number of slaves, for the most part single, brought together from all quarters, without regard to family ties, for purposes purely of speculation and of cupidity, entailed upon this community by strangers, citizens of other States, was repugnant to the moral tone and sense of our people, and lead, doubtless, to the municipal regulation now complained of. The tax of $10 was, it is believed, intended to operate as a check upon the growing annoyance and evil, and the Committee think that they represent the feeling and the sentiment of this community, when they express the conviction that it will be far better that a few individual interests should suffer, and that something should be lost to the general interests of agriculture, rather than such exhibitions shall again be intruded upon it.

But it is an assumption to allege that the interest of agriculture must suffer should this tax exclude slaves, from other States, from sale in Charleston. The communications from other States of the Union, by rail roads and steamers are daily, rapid, certain and economical, and capital which seeks investment in slaves for Agricultural purposes within the State need not be defeated in its object—slaves may be brought beyond the limits of the State, and placed upon the soil, as readily as though they were brought first to Charleston, then sold and removed to the plantation. If an argument may be inferred, from a fact well known to the brokers and to others in this community, namely that the sales of slaves, the property of estates in neighboring States, Georgia and Florida for instance, have not unfrequently been transferred to Charleston, it would be that the interest of agriculture will be the better subserved by the former course, by purchases made in other States; for the expenses and risks incidental to removal would not be incurred was not a larger price than could be obtained abroad, the inducement for seeking Charleston as a market.

ROBEET [sic] N. GOURDIN.
WM. McBURNEY.
E. W. EDGERTON.
W. PORCHER MILES,
Mayor

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From the Council’s defense of slavery, what can you infer about the historical context that shaped their response?

2. How would you characterize the tone of the Council’s statement about slavery? Whom do you think the councilmen were trying to convince?