

crop. I need hardly say that these staples cannot be produced to any extent where the proprietor of the soil cultivates it with his own hands.

And what would be the effect of putting an end to the cultivation of these staples and thus annihilating, at a blow, two-thirds or three-fourths of our foreign commerce? Can any sane mind contemplate such a result without terror? Our slavery has not only given existence to millions of slaves within our own territories; it has given the means of subsistence, and therefore of existence, to millions of freemen in our Confederate [United] States, enabling them to send forth their swarms to overspread the plains and forests of the West and appear as the harbingers of civilization. Not only on our continent but on the other it has given existence [in textile mills] to hundreds of thousands and the means of comfortable subsistence to millions. A distinguished citizen of our state has lately stated that our great staple, cotton, has contributed more than anything else of later times to the progress of civilization. By enabling the poor to obtain cheap and becoming clothing, it has inspired a taste for comfort, the first stimulus to civilization.

## 2. The “Blessings” of the Slave (1849)

*Connecticut-born and Puritan-descended Solon Robinson became a Yankee peddler at eighteen. After he moved to Indiana, he attained prominence as a trader and agriculturist. During the course of his extensive travels through practically every state, he wrote a series of discerning sketches for the foremost agricultural magazines. The following contribution to a leading southern trade journal is hardly what one would expect from a Connecticut Yankee. In what respects did Robinson appear to be too soft on slavery, and in what respects did he disagree with the abolitionists?*

A greater punishment could not be devised or inflicted upon the Southern slave at this day than to give him that liberty which God in his wisdom and mercy deprived him of. . . .

Free them from control, and how soon does poverty and wretchedness overtake them! . . . I boldly and truly assert that you may travel Europe over—yea, you may visit the boasted freemen of America—aye, you may search the world over—before you find a laboring peasantry who are more happy, more contented, as a class of people, or who are better clothed and fed and better provided for in sickness, infirmity, and old age, or who enjoy more of the essential comforts of life, than these so-called miserable, oppressed, abused, starved slaves. . . .

I doubt whether one single instance can be found among the slaves of the South where one has injured himself at long and excessive labor. Instead of a cruel and avaricious master being able to extort more than a very reasonable amount of labor from him, his efforts will certainly produce the contrary effect. This is a well-known fact, so much so indeed that an overseer of this character cannot get employment among masters, who know that over-driving a Negro, as well as a mule, is the poorest way to get work out of either of them. These facts are well understood

<sup>2</sup>*De Bow's Review*, vol. 7 (n.s., vol. 1, 1849), pp. 217–221, 383–384.

by all observant masters and overseers: that neither mule nor Negro can be made to do more than a certain amount of work; and that amount so small in comparison to the amount done by white laborers at the North that it is a universal observation at the South. Northern men are always the hardest masters, in the vain attempt they make to force the Negro to do even half as much as a hireling in New England is compelled to do, or lose his place and wages. . . .

It is true that some men abuse and harshly treat their slaves. So do some men abuse their wives and children and apprentices and horses and cattle. . . .

The fact is notorious that slaves are better treated now than formerly, and that the improvement in their condition is progressing; partly from their masters becoming more temperate and better men, but mainly from the greatest of all moving causes in human actions—self-interest. For masters have discovered in the best of all schools—experience—that their true interest is inseparably bound up with the humane treatment, comfort, and happiness of their slaves.

And many masters have discovered, too, that their slaves are more temperate, more industrious, more kind to one another, more cheerful, more faithful, and more obedient under the ameliorating influences of religion than under all the driving and whipping of all the tyrannical taskmasters that have existed since the day when the children of Israel were driven to the task of making Egyptian brick without straw.

And I do most fearlessly assert, and defy contradiction, that in no part of this Union, even in Puritan New England, is the Sabbath better kept by master and slave, by employer and hireling, or by all classes, high and low, rich and poor, than in the state of Mississippi, where I have often been told that that thing so accursed of God [slavery] existed in all its most disgusting deformity, wretchedness, and sinful horror. From the small plantations, the slaves go more regularly, and better dressed and behaved, to church, often a distance of five or six miles, than any other class of laborers that I have ever been acquainted with. Upon many of the large plantations, divine service is performed more regularly, and to larger and more orderly audiences, than in some county towns. . . .

In all my tour during the past winter, I did not see or hear of but two cases of flogging: one of which was for stealing, and the other for running away from as good a master as ever a servant need to have, which is proved by the appearance and general good conduct of his Negroes. And that they are well fed I know from many days' personal observation; and I have seen some of them with better broadcloth suits on than I often wear myself; and more spare money than their master, as he will freely acknowledge. . . .

But I do seriously say that I did not see or hear of one place where the Negroes were not well fed; and I did not see a ragged gang of Negroes in the South. And I could only hear of one plantation where the Negroes were overworked or unjustly flogged, and on that plantation the master was a drunken, abusive wretch, as heartily despised by his neighbors as he was hated by his Negroes. And were it not for the consequences to themselves if they should rise upon and pull him limb from limb, his brother planters would rejoice that he had met the fate that cruelty to slaves, they are free to say, justly merits.

The two things that are most despised and hated in the South are masters that abuse and starve and ill-treat their slaves, and abolitionists, who seize upon every

isolated case of the kind, and trumpet it through the land as evidence of the manner that all slaves are treated, and then call upon the people of the free states to aid the Negroes to free themselves from such inhuman bondage, peaceably if they can, forcibly if they must, no matter whose or how much blood shall flow.

### 3. Slaves Don't Strike (1846)

*The South invested its capital in human muscle, not machinery; in the lash system, not the cash system. The slaveowners had one ace-in-the-hole argument against emancipation: it would wipe out that reliable supply of labor without which southern agriculture (and northern textile factories) would perish. These fears were not groundless, as the economic chaos that followed the Civil War amply demonstrated. Sir Charles Lyell, the distinguished British geologist and world traveler, was exposed to the southern viewpoint. How does he explain the fact that the South clung to slavery while white day labor was admittedly cheaper?*

An intelligent Louisianian said to me, "Were we to emancipate our Negroes as suddenly as your government did the West Indians, they would be a doomed race. But there can be no doubt that white labor is more profitable even in this climate."

"Then, why do you not encourage it?" I asked.

"It must be the work of time," he replied. "The prejudices of owners have to be overcome, and the sugar and cotton crop is easily lost if not taken in at once when ripe; the canes being damaged by a slight frost, and the cotton requiring to be picked dry as soon as mature, and being ruined by rain. Very lately a planter, five miles below New Orleans, having resolved to dispense with slave labor, hired one hundred Irish and German emigrants at very high wages. In the middle of the harvest they all struck for double pay. No others were to be had, and it was impossible to purchase slaves in a few days. In that short time he lost produce to the value of \$10,000."

### 4. Comparing Slave Labor and Wage Labor (1850)

*In response to abolitionist attacks in the 1840s, supporters of slavery became more aggressive. Instead of simply defending the "peculiar institution," they began to argue that slavery benefited slaveowners and slaves alike. Proslavery propagandists frequently compared northern and southern institutions in the light of this argument. This cartoon published in Boston is an example of such a comparison. Why would an attack on conditions in England be an effective way to respond to criticism of slavery in America? Were there advantages of slave labor, and if so, to whom did they accrue? In what sense was wage labor really "free"?*

<sup>3</sup>Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers: London: J. Murray, 1849), vol. 2, pp. 126–127.

<sup>4</sup>Library of Congress, #USZ62-1285.