

WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproduction of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

MASTERS
WITHOUT
SLAVES

*Southern Planters in the Civil War
and Reconstruction*

JAMES L. ROARK



W · W · NORTON & COMPANY

New York · London

To my mother and my father

Contents

Copyright © 1977 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed
in the United States of America.

W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Roark, James L.
Masters Without Slaves.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Reconstruction. 2. Plantation life—Southern
States. 3. Slavery in the United States—Southern
States. 4. Southern States—Social conditions.

I. Title.

E668.R64 1977 976'.04 76-47689

ISBN-0-393-05562-0

ISBN-0-393-00901-7 pbk.

9 0

Preface vii

I. PRELUDE

Chapter 1: The Planters' Revolution 1

II. WAR-STORM

Chapter 2: Plantations under Siege 35

Chapter 3: A Loss of Mastery 68

III. AFTERMATH

Chapter 4: Bricks without Straw 111

Chapter 5: "The Soul Is Fled" 156

Notes 211

Bibliography 251

Index 267

CHAPTER 4

Bricks without Straw

"And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying, Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves."

EXODUS 5:6-7

Emancipation was a rolling barrage that enveloped every plantation by 1865. For the planter class, slavery's destruction became the central experience of the Civil War. It confronted each planter with problems his most deeply held assumptions told him were insoluble. Not only did he believe that a decent Southern society required the labor and race controls only slavery provided, but he was also still wedded to the notion that it was impossible to manage successfully a staple-producing plantation using free black labor. Unable to imagine a South without slavery or making cotton without coercion, some refused to try. They escaped the problem, by one means or another. But the majority saw no choice but to remain and go on planting, and the search for a system to replace slavery became the central concern of their economic lives. For at least two years, however, their actions lacked the conviction, or indeed any expectation, of success. They worked with a form of labor they assumed would fail.

how to replace slavery?

I

Because the free-labor revolution rode on Yankee bayonets, the new regime actually began to emerge even before the old was defeated. Emancipation sometimes came early and abruptly, as when Federal troops swooped down upon the Sea Islands only seven months after Fort Sumter. Willie Lee Rose eloquently describes the transition of the islands from slavery to freedom. The Port Royal experiment, she demonstrates, was a rehearsal for Reconstruction, a preview in miniature of the revolution that would sweep the south.¹ And yet, the Port Royal experiment was in one important way unique. Because Beaufort District slaveowners fled when the first Northern soldiers came ashore, the transition from slave to free labor was made without the presence of the masters. The Sea Island episode dramatically revealed Northern intentions and black desires, but by its nature, it could not suggest the planters' response.

More indicative was the drama taking place in another Southern theater. In most of the Federally controlled portions of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, a contract-labor system replaced the legal institution of slavery. All the major actors were present—Federal authorities, blacks, and planters—as well as a supporting cast of philanthropists, scoundrels, and sightseers. When the curtain rang down on the first act in 1865, planters unanimously agreed that they were performing in a tragedy.

The Mississippi River, life line of valley planters before the war, became a highway for Federal invasion after 1861. New Orleans fell to sea-borne forces in April, 1862, and Union troops under the command of General Benjamin F. Butler occupied the city. Farther north, after General Ulysses S. Grant's capture of strategic Confederate positions in western Tennessee, Union armies began working their way down the river, and they did not stop until the summer of 1863, when their capture of Vicksburg placed the entire Mississippi River in Federal hands.

Slavery had begun to come apart even before Union troops arrived. Up and down the river, slaves began to stir. The mere rumor of a Federal advance precipitated an unprecedented strike by blacks in southern Louisiana. At "Magnolia," the slaves of Henry Effingham Lawrence were in "a state of mutiny," and he was forced to bribe them

to keep them in the fields.² In Bayou Lafourche, Franklin Pugh observed that news that Northern troops were near caused "a perfect stampede of the negroes on some places."³ Even more threatening than strikes and runaways was the sharp increase in black violence. While there were no major insurrections, small rebellions became common as blacks asserted their independence.⁴ At "Energy," when sugar planter David Pugh and his overseer attempted to whip one obstinate slave, they were beaten, tied up, and carried off to Thibodaux by his comrades.⁵

With actual invasion, plantations often became military battlegrounds. Disputed areas were ravaged by warring soldiers, and ruin came in both blue and gray. A Bayou Teche plantation was stripped by Confederate troops, who hauled away "nearly every resource for living from day to day."⁶ A Mississippi planter declared that Union cavalry "were feeding on me every time they come to Holly Springs, and they made 72 raids there."⁷ From New Orleans to Memphis, the banks of the Mississippi River were a monotonous spectacle of ruined and abandoned plantations. "The whole country here . . . is a perfect waste," a planter in Port Gibson, Mississippi, declared in December, 1863, "not a[n] ear of corn scarcely to be found & most of the population are receiving provisions from the Yankees. . . . The negroes that remain are in a most demoralized condition & are really of but little use."⁸

Federal occupation accelerated the process of disintegration. Rather than witness the slow death of slavery, some planters fled. They took their slaves and streamed into Texas and Alabama. Most stayed, however, determined to battle for their estates.⁹ But the mistress of the McCollam plantation in Terrebonne Parish reported in 1863 that nearly all of their slaves had deserted. Even those who remained, she said sadly, "were not more faithful than many who went off but staid out of a policy to see how the thing would turn out." Her hope was that they could get through the season without total collapse.¹⁰ William J. Minor, a Natchez resident who owned three Louisiana sugar plantations, complained of "troubles and difficulties" without number. No sooner would he overcome one problem, he said, "than a new one arises & I do not feel competent to contend successfully against them all." By January, 1863, his slaves were "completely demoralized . . . going, coming & working when they please & as they please." He saw "the handwriting on the wall." If the

war continued for twelve more months, he said, "all negro men of any value will be taken, the women & children will be left for their masters to maintain, which they cannot do." The landowners "will make nothing, the lands will be sold for taxes, & bot. [bought] by northern men & the original owners will be made beggars." ¹¹

Federal military authorities in Louisiana were unwilling to give slavery another twelve months. Although slavery was still legally intact, in the summer of 1862 General Butler began substituting a system of compensated labor. And even after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, specifically exempting from its provisions loyal areas under Federal occupation, General Nathaniel Banks, Butler's successor, continued and extended the new labor system. The Butler and Banks plan was embodied in a detailed code that regulated all aspects of the employment and treatment of black labor. In its final form, the code required planters to enter into contracts with their laborers and to compensate them with rations, housing, medical care, garden plots, and wages or shares of the crop. Flogging and other forms of physical punishment were outlawed. Laborers, for their part, were required to work in the fields or face harsh alternatives. Once they signed their contracts, they had to remain for the entire season. Feigned sickness could lead to a forfeiture of pay or rations. Insolence or disobedience would be punished by local military authorities. Parish provost marshals assumed final authority to settle disputes between planters and their laborers. In time, the new labor code spread from southern Louisiana throughout most of the Mississippi valley. ¹²

The Union program was in many ways not a dramatic break with slavery. Union officials shared important ideas with planters about the proper role of blacks. Occupying Northerners believed, like planters, that blacks should remain on plantations, labor diligently, and continue to be subordinate and obedient. They had no intention of fomenting social revolution. In fact, the new regulations were intended to maintain control over blacks and to stabilize plantation agriculture. Essentially, Union officials created a system of forced free labor, for blacks with neither homes nor jobs were sent to plantations to work under contract. ¹³

The immediate response of planters to the new regulations varied. Some die-hard Confederates refused to co-operate at all, and either fled or quit planting entirely. But most planters grudgingly partici-

pated, seeking to mold the new labor program to their specifications. Consequently, when Union officials called local meetings to elicit Southern opinion, planters attended, eager to express their views of the new system. And many regularly took advantage of whatever services the Union army could provide. Depending on the local provost marshal, the services could be considerable. One planter was encouraged when he heard in 1863 that the authorities in his neighborhood "have sent word to the planters to come and get their negro women and children," for he was certain that the army would soon return the men. ¹⁴ Planters regularly engaged in "politicking" at the local headquarters, hoping to wangle favors. Like many others, William Minor succeeded on several occasions in having Federal soldiers visit his plantations to intimidate fractious black workers. ¹⁵

And yet it would be wrong to assume that the Union army and the planters were allies, that their differences were insignificant, and that the planters were content with the army's substitute for slavery. ¹⁶ The participation of planters in the new system did not automatically imply their surrender of any right of property in slaves. Nor did participation assure their approval of the final program. Most planters admitted that they had been heard, but most were also convinced that their advice had not been heeded. They realized that despite all its solicitude, the occupying army had ended slavery. While Union troops had put blacks back on plantations, they had not, the planters maintained, put them back to work. Planters were forced to pay wages or shares; they were officially forbidden to whip, and blacks could theoretically change employers every year at contract time. ¹⁷ The Union army certainly wanted to keep blacks in the fields, but it also clearly sought to guarantee that they were compensated and that they were not brutalized and re-enslaved. Planters could not join with the army in celebration of the new labor system, despite an abolitionist's charge that the scheme was tantamount to the "reestablishment of slavery." ¹⁸ It may have been no more than a single step toward freedom, but in planters' eyes it was one step too many.

It was a system of "practically free labor," planters cried, and they predicted unequivocally that it would ruin them all. "Our negroes will soon be ashes in our hands," James Lusk Alcorn of Mississippi declared, "our lands valueless without them." ¹⁹ The essence of the planters' argument was expressed in the summer of 1863 when a provost marshal asked William W. Pugh for his opinion of the new

labor system. This prominent Assumption Parish sugar planter declared that he expected a total breakdown when it came time to harvest the sugar cane and carry it to the mills. Then, he said, the press of hard work would reveal the error of the new system's central assumption. It would prove that, contrary to Northern opinion, Negroes could not "be transformed by proclamation." Successful planting required "thorough control of ample and continuous labor," Pugh explained, but under new regulations, Negroes "are expected to perform their new obligations without coercion, & without the fear of punishment which is essential to stimulate the idle and correct the vicious." Without "the right to punish (however moderately)," he argued, the new labor system must fail, for blacks could not "be induced to work by persuasion."²⁰

The fact that plantation agriculture along the Mississippi was rapidly falling apart was undeniable. Planters invariably blamed free labor. A Louisiana gentleman complained that because there were "no police, no watch, no guards to arrest them," Negroes moved at will, often "travelling all night." Another asserted that the entire plantation country was infected with "a spirit of destruction and semi-barbarism." One old man explained in detail how free labor had dragged him down. For thirty-seven years, he said, he had been a sugar grower, employing an average of seventy-five hands a season. Before the war his crop averaged more than eight hundred hogsheads of sugar. Under the wage system in 1863, he had made only forty. His crop would have reached his prewar average, he explained, but for the defection of his hands at cutting and boiling time. Without slavery, he could not exercise compulsion at the crucial moments of the season. Under the government's revised wage schedule, adopted in 1864 to stimulate black labor, he did no better. "High wages will not make the Negro industrious," he asserted. The "nature of the negro cannot be changed. . . . all he desires is to eat, drink and sleep, and perform the least possible amount of labor." Free labor meant that everything was "fast passing to destruction."²¹

Only rarely did planters acquiesce in the labor revolution. More often, if they accepted it at all, they did so reluctantly and solely because the power of the Union army of occupation gave them no alternative. They sought to evade its requirements whenever possible.²² Planters moved quietly to re-establish the compulsions of slavery. William Minor explained to his overseer that the Negroes

"must be got back to the old way of doing business by degrees. Everything must be done to encourage & make them work before resorting to corporeal punishment." But if they would not work without the lash, he made clear, "it must be resorted to & inflicted in a proper manner."²³ And in the summer of 1864, Augustin Pugh left little doubt about what he meant when he recorded that his overseer had given one "unruly" slave "a good punishing."²⁴ But with the provost marshal just down the road, blacks usually had some redress, and planters like William Minor and Augustin Pugh spent many days arguing before Federal authorities.

Planters sought to defend their interests wherever they could, including the political front. In 1863, many of those sugar and cotton growers who had managed to survive the Federal invasions of Louisiana formed the conservative wing of a group which was attempting to restore the state to the Union and re-establish home rule. Unlike the Free State forces, however, they were, as one observer noted, the "party that has learned nothing and forgotten nothing," for they sought to keep "slavery on its ancient throne." But in December, 1863, President Lincoln cut short the planters' effort when he declared that the acceptance of emancipation would be the first prerequisite to restoration. Consequently, planters were largely absent when a convention met in April, 1864, to draw up a new state constitution. Still, spokesmen for the old order defended the theory of slave labor and called for continuing the constitution of 1852, which by apportioning representation according to total population (including slaves) had assured the dominance of the plantation parishes. The majority of the delegates, however, denounced slavery, rebellion, and black-belt dominance, and strongly intimated that planters had gotten just what they deserved. There would be a resurgence of reactionary forces after the war, but for the moment it appeared to planters that their counterrevolution had failed, both on the plantations and at the capital.²⁵

Southerners were neither the only ones participating in early Reconstruction farming in the lower Mississippi valley nor the only ones disheartened with free black labor. A small band of Northern civilians had followed in the wake of the Union armies, eager to become managers of the abandoned plantations the Federal government inherited. Contemporaries generally believed Northern lessees were more interested in fortunes than in freedmen. The superintendent of

freedmen in the Natchez district, for instance, denounced these Northerners as men whose "highest thought is a greenback, whose God is a cotten bale, and whose devil is a guerilla." ²⁶

Occasionally, however, a different sort found his way into plantation country. In February, 1864, Isaac Shoemaker took charge of a cotton plantation near Warrenton, Mississippi. He became a "Yankee planter," he explained in his diary, because he wanted "to give labor to the Freedmen, and endeavor to learn them how to appreciate their new condition, and to enable them as soon as possible to take care of themselves, and lighten the expense the Govt is now burdened with on their account. . . ." ²⁷ Even admitting the possibility of a degree of self-deception, Shoemaker was certainly no carpetbagging gambler.

The young Northerner's idealism was quickly put to the test. He knew that slavery was a hideous institution and was prepared to find that it had left its mark on the bondsmen, but he was shocked to discover how deeply it had cut. Troublesome habits and attitudes proved entirely resistant to his ministrations. He complained that the freedmen were forever "timid and doubtful of everything." He found that he could place "little dependance" on their "word." They were just "like careless children, dropping everything just where they last used it." He thought they were "governed by any whim." And their continual stealing "certainly lessens one's interest and sympathy." After only two months on the plantation, he concluded sadly that "it will take many years to get them systematized, and without that, they can never thrive themselves." In the meanwhile, firm discipline was required, for "they have been so long used to obedience to positive command, that the change must be gradual and in proportion to their education in their new sphere." Rebel raiders cut short Shoemaker's experiment in planting, and in May, 1864, he packed his bags and headed north. ²⁸

Shoemaker's experience in Mississippi is revealing in that it shows how an outsider's ideas could quickly begin to take on the coloration of the ideas of an average Southern planter. That so sanguine a person could so rapidly become discouraged with free black labor helps explain why planters faced the future with so little hope. Even more important in Shoemaker's reaction to his experience, however, are the clear limits to his acceptance of the planter perspective. While his faith in the freedmen had been sorely tested, he stopped short of

adopting the theory that slavery was a positive good. He retained his belief that blacks could *eventually* become self-reliant citizens, and he steadfastly focused on the deficiencies of slavery, not the deficiencies of blacks. He realized that in the freedmen he encountered social, not racial, characteristics. From his perspective the difficulties were remediable, whereas from the planters' they clearly were not.

What Shoemaker had learned was that slavery was sometimes a poor seedbed for the Protestant work ethic, that the habits and values spawned were not always immediately functional in a wage-labor system. He was disillusioned because he could not in a single season imbue in a premodern work force values and attitudes that had often taken a generation to develop in the North and a century or more in England. Elsewhere in the South, however, other Northerners found that when freedmen were treated fairly they often worked without coercion. Blacks did not object to work but to the attempt by planters to continue forms and conditions of work which were only slavery by another name. An observer was essentially correct in his emphasis when he concluded, "The difficulty is not with the emancipated slave, but with the old master." ²⁹

By the close of the war, agriculture in the lower Mississippi River valley was prostrate. Neither planters nor provost marshals, singly or together, were able to sustain the antebellum plantation economy under Federal occupation. Complete control, the planters' dream and sometimes their achievement, had evaporated. As plantation discipline eroded, blacks resisted the continuation of the old ways and production suffered enormously. The sugar harvest of 1865 was a pitiful 3 per cent of that of 1861. Land that had sold for a hundred dollars an acre went begging at five dollars. Attrition among planters was astounding. One estimate was that in the sugar country not more than one in seven kept going. ³⁰

Even the chief architect of the new system, General Banks, had to admit that his experiment was in serious difficulty. In November, 1864, he solicited advice from planters about how to revive plantation agriculture. A committee of Terrebonne planters, including Andrew McCollam, William Minor, and Tobias Gibson, met personally with Banks. They requested enactment of a long list of new laws emphasizing increased controls on labor. One proposal would have prohibited black ownership of livestock, another would have made workers financially responsible for teams and equipment, and another would

have reinstated the old pass and curfew system to regulate the movement of blacks. They based their requests, Minor remembered, on their "experience in regard to the character of negroes and their management." 31

But General Banks rejected their proposals. Planters, he declared, "were full of theories, prejudices, & opinions based on the old system." Banks advised them to "look to the new state of things, to the future and not to the past," for their "future steps were not to be guided by the lights of past experience." But the planters' past experience with slavery and their recent experience with free black labor provided the only light available. And in their eyes, while slavery had succeeded, Banks's system had "proved a complete failure." 32

Slavery's spokesmen had for decades promised that abolition would spell disaster, and by 1865, planters were surrounded by debris. "The wish of the Negro is now the white man's law," William Minor asserted bitterly. "A man had as well be in purgatory as attempt to work a sugar plantation under existing circumstances." 33 The wartime response of Mississippi valley planters to the free-labor revolution was but a preview of the larger performance which would take place across the South after Appomattox.

★
Wartime Mississippi Valley free-labor system
II reshadowing of post-Appomattox South

In April, 1865, planters' dreams of perpetuating slavery in an independent republic vanished, and they awakened to defeat and ruin. Their revolution had cost the South a quarter of a million men dead, two billions in slave property lost, and three and a half million black laborers freed. Hundreds of plantations had been devastated, and dozens of towns and cities were in ashes. Yet despite the physical and human destruction of the South, the planters' basic assumptions were intact. "Nothing could overcome this rooted idea," a visiting newspaperman noted, "that the negro was worthless, except under the lash." 34 Predictably, therefore, when the war ended and it was time to begin putting the pieces together again, some did not even try.

P. give up planting

The most extreme individual symbol of resistance to Appomattox was Edmund Ruffin. An eccentric Virginia planter and agricultural reformer, he was the ultimate irreconcilable. For more than a decade

before the war, Ruffin had labored furiously to light the fires of Southern nationalism, and finally, with Fort Sumter, years of disappointment were swept away. But his celebration quickly turned to frustration as Jefferson Davis proved ineffectual and Confederate armies failed to strike the decisive blow. When Yankee troopers overran his son's plantation, burning his house and driving away his slaves, frustration became bitterness. He cried out for a strategy of "revenge" and scorched earth. In 1865, Appomattox lay like ashes in his mouth. His personal world was in shambles, and his beloved Southern nation was lifeless. Weary, sick at heart, confronted with the sight of Northerners and blacks freely swarming over his homeland, he decided upon the act of supreme intransigence. In his final entry in his diary, he said, "And now with my latest writing and utterance, and with what will be near my latest breath, I here repeat and would willingly proclaim my unmitigated hatred to Yankee rule—to all political, social and business connections with Yankees, and the perfidious, malignant and vile Yankee race." Unable to free the South, he chose to free himself. On June 17, 1865, he fired one last and literal volley of defiance, and with it he ended his own life. 35

Many other Southerners were also determined to resist defeat and its consequences but chose less extreme avenues of resistance. Thousands, perhaps as many as ten thousand, quite literally turned their backs on the catastrophe and left the South. As one emigré later remembered, Southerners had either "to turn the sword into the ploughshare . . . or to emigrate." 36 Despite pleas from Robert E. Lee and other Confederate heroes to stay and rebuild, many could not contemplate farming in the postwar South. Some left when they heard the news of Lee's surrender. Others spent months in "meditation, deliberation, and preparation." 37 Some were attracted to the prosperous cities of the North and to the rich farmlands of the Plains and the West. Others left for Europe, usually settling in England or France. And still others chose destinations in Latin America. Emigration cut across class lines, but Southern planters, including the most prominent, were heavily represented in the exodus.

For every planter who actually packed his bags and left the South, there were several others who longed to join him. Many had "the inclination," a Mississippi woman observed in January, 1866, but "they have not the means." 38 In Charleston, William H. Heyward expressed both the circumstances and the aspirations of many of his

emigration

class when he said, "I hope the day is near when we may be able to sell our land, the only property we now have, and that we may realize sufficient from it to enable us to turn our back on this accursed government and people." ³⁹ Planters with limited finances would sometimes pool resources to send out an advance agent to scout locations. One Louisianan claimed he represented six hundred fellow planters when he sailed for Mexico. ⁴⁰ In time, reports from scouts and early emigrés began to drift back to the South, and while the stories occasionally glowed, more often they told of hardship and disappointment. The Federal Government also erected road blocks to emigration. In 1866, it prohibited emigration to Mexico and arrested agents of Mexican colonization schemes operating in the South. ⁴¹ Obstacles of every description kept plantation families at home. Had the desire to leave been the only determinant, however, the small stream of émigrés would surely have been a flood.

That so many planters actually left—ripping families from their homes and neighborhoods, selling or giving away whatever had been saved from the war, risking a dangerous, expensive journey, often to an unknown, alien land—was dramatic evidence of the terror of their vision of the postwar South. Emigration has traditionally been the product of both a push and a pull, an unpleasant immediate circumstance and a promise of a better life elsewhere, but in the planters' case, the push was immeasurably more potent than the pull. They left not merely to better themselves in a new land but to escape destruction at home. While there was no "exile mind," emigrés did share a mental picture of a devastated, degraded, and uninhabitable South. And given their estimation of their prospects under Northern rule, with free black labor, their decision to leave was fully rational.

The restoration of "Yankee" government drove many from the country. One Virginia woman found it "so humiliating to be under Yankee domination after all our hard fighting" that she was "nearly crazy to go to Europe." ⁴² In May, 1865, another Virginian began preparing "for a new life in South America" because he could not "live in peace under Yankee rule." ⁴³ Similarly, a Mississippian earlier sought "some other country" because he could not "live in southern Yankeedom." ⁴⁴ And a Louisianan, John Perkins, was so nauseated by the South's subjugation that he personally put the torch to his own plantation before fleeing to Mexico. ⁴⁵

The practical consequences of Northern power were frequently

crucial in planters' calculations. Prominent Confederates often fled in fear of their lives, especially after witnessing the treatment the North accorded Jefferson Davis. Robert Toombs, for instance, headed for Havana to escape being "imprisoned and treated with indignity." ⁴⁶ William H. B. Richardson of South Carolina believed Northern confiscation of plantations was "inevitable." He reasoned, therefore, that one could abandon everything and not suffer any greater loss than if one stayed. ⁴⁷ And the events of Reconstruction provided planters with additional stimuli. An Alabama planter who worked as an agent for a Brazilian colonization organization reported in October, 1867, that "military despotism" and the "enfranchisement of the negroes," as well as a drop in cotton prices, had convinced many more planters "to abandon the country." ⁴⁸

Emancipation, however, was the crucial factor in many decisions to emigrate. Major Joseph Abney, a former slaveowner and president of a colonization company, explained that planters believed that because they could not make "the negro to labor without coercion," the South's future was "poverty, decay, and bankruptcy." To emancipate the slaves with "one fell dash of the pen, to set free the negroes who constituted three fourths of all the property that remained us, and nearly the whole of the laboring power of the country, and quarter them among us, where they will defy our authority, remain a subject of continual agitation for fanatics . . . and discourage and utterly hinder the introduction here of a better class of laborers, is enough . . . to drive any people into despair and desperation." A "deeper degree of destruction and want is inevitable," Abney predicted, "and as the negro will not work, and must eat, hunger and starvation, and madness and crime will run riot through our borders and there is no earthly power that can interpose to save us and our children. . . ." ⁴⁹ Emancipation had severed the taproot of Southern society, and the South's collapse was but a matter of time.

The desire to escape from free blacks was almost universal among plantation emigrés. "To live in a Land where Free Negroes make the majority of the inhabitants," a relative of William Porcher Miles said in 1867, "is to me revolting." In South Carolina, he complained, "Every mulattoe is your equal & every 'Nigger' is your superior & you haven't even a country." It was inconceivable that anyone would remain who could "possibly get away." Only his health and age prevented him from fleeing to England, where Negroes could not

"offend yr nostrils as in these USA." He could foresee no future for his children "different from what they would have if they were in Jamaica," and he asked Miles if he did not agree that their only hope was "that the Blacks will die out so that they will interfere with us as little as they do in N York or Paris?"⁵⁰ Two years later, a gentleman suggested emigration to another South Carolinian, James Sparkman. "You and I may not be able to profit much by it," Sparkman's old friend told him, but for the children's sake, he thanked God that there were still some places "beyond Negro rule."⁵¹ Free blacks not only offended planters' sensibilities, but some believed they also threatened planters' lives. Lucy Judkins Durr remembered that her family's departure from Alabama was prompted by fear of the freedman, "an idle menace—the man without a hoe."⁵² In 1867, Henry L. Graves made plans to move his family from Georgia to Honduras. "I think it will be unsafe for families of ladies, especially those so fully identified with rebellion as we are, to remain in the country this fall and winter," he declared. "I am no alarmist," Graves said, "but I think an outbreak among the negroes will be inevitable."⁵³

Scores of plantation families chose to leave the South, therefore, rather than suffer its final destruction. But however eager they were to escape, they rarely fled blindly. Because planters chose their destinations with some care, the locations of their new homes provide clues to their motivations and goals. Those who headed for New York, London, or Paris were obviously not hoping to reconstruct their lives according to the old pattern, but those who sailed for Latin America often were. Latin America had fascinated Southern slaveholders for decades, and after 1865 the basis of their interest shifted from curiosity to urgent necessity. Every country south of the border attracted Southerners, but by far the most popular were Mexico and Brazil.

Mexico and Brazil resembled one another in many respects and often attracted Southern planters for the same reasons. Both countries offered huge expanses of fertile land easily adapted to familiar plantation crops, attractive social institutions, and large reservoirs of cheap labor. The rulers of both countries, Maximilian and Dom Pedro II, personally encouraged Southerners to come to settle and gave them warm welcomes. That both states were monarchies apparently bothered almost no one, though emigrés often expressed anxiety about the governments' stability. Some planters openly admitted their relief at leaving the "mobocracy" behind, and looked forward to life under an enlightened monarch.⁵⁴

Most fundamentally, both Mexico and Brazil appeared to offer planters the possibility of resurrecting antebellum Southern society. On the plains near Veracruz and in the river valleys beyond São Paulo, planters dreamed of establishing insulated colonies where they would be free to rebuild the familiar plantation life. They had no intention of assimilating into Mexican or Brazilian society. One emigré remembered that Southerners in Brazil were "tenacious of their ideas, manners, & religion" and laughed "with scorn" at their "adopted land." They were "egotistical," suffused with pride, and had to be "masters."⁵⁵ The Mexican experiment collapsed in 1866 when Maximilian fell, but had it survived, it is likely that the plains of Carlota would have resounded with the shouts of young Southerners jousting in chivalric tournaments, just as did the back country of Brazil.⁵⁶

Despite their similarities, Mexico and Brazil did differ strikingly in one respect. As one emigrant observed, while neither country had "Yankees," only Brazil had "slaves."⁵⁷ Planters were very much aware of the differences between the labor systems of the two, and many chose Brazil precisely "because it was the last resting place of slavery."⁵⁸ Henry M. Price of Virginia, for example, who said after the war that his "belief in the orthodoxy of Slavery is as firmly fixed as my belief in [the] Bible," decided on Brazil because of its dazzling resources, its rich soil, and the presence there of slavery.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Matthew Fontaine Maury, who became the Imperial Commissioner of Colonization for Mexico, decided against Brazil because of its slave-labor system. His most fervent wish was to rebuild antebellum Southern society abroad, but he concluded that Brazil was unsuitable because it "was a slave society, and for the Southern people to go there, would simply be 'leaping from the fire back into the frying pan' again." Another emancipation would simply be too much to bear.⁶⁰

On the whole, however, the differences between the two labor systems only slightly affected emigration. Southern planters assumed that both the Mexican and Brazilian labor arrangements would support their colonies. It is true that in the early days of emigration to Mexico, planters sometimes brought in their former slaves under the guise of servants, but from the beginning they fully expected to build their plantations upon "the gentle and docile race" of Mexican peasants. Planters assumed that the peasants were inherently tractable, steady, and compliant, unlike blacks, and that, therefore, they would

not need the coercions of slavery.⁶¹ Because of the racial composition of the labor forces in Mexico and Brazil, therefore, most Southerners were confident that they could build their plantations equally well in either country.

And yet, Southern emigration to Brazil presents a paradox. A dominant motive for emigration was the desire to escape free blacks, but Brazil was the home of millions of blacks who were freer than those the planters had left in the South. The key to the paradox apparently lies in the planters' ignorance of the Brazilian social order. In 1865, Southern newspapers were jammed with tales of the paradise which lay below the Amazon. Planters learned of Brazil's fabulous resources, its sympathetic government, and its flourishing system of slavery. But they did not read about its social relations, and early emigrés expressed no reservations about what they expected to find. If they thought at all about the race relations and free blacks they would encounter in Brazil, they probably imagined them in terms of their own antebellum experience. Free blacks had certainly been a nuisance, and hostility had mounted in the decade before the war, but in the South they had represented less than 3 per cent of the free population, and their behavior, like the behavior of most blacks in the region, had usually befitted their station in society.⁶²

Firsthand experience with Brazilian life, however, usually shocked and appalled Southern planters. A member of a colony in the Amazon valley reported angrily that several of their band had recently left "in disgust with colored equality." She took sardonic pleasure in the thought that they were returning to "negro superiority."⁶³ And by 1867, the truth about Brazil was out. An organizer for Brazilian emigration reported that planters still expressed a desire to leave the South, but were rejecting Brazil because of "its remoteness, different language, religion, and social ideas." But the declining interest in Brazil was not merely a reflection of that country's changing image, for as the organizer further observed, many planters were now attempting "to go to the non-negro districts of the United States."⁶⁴ Less than three years after the end of the war, planters themselves were beginning to change. Many were no longer seeking a racial master-slave hierarchy; instead, they now sought a free-labor society with as few blacks as possible.

In the immediate postwar years, however, Brazil did attract plantation families from the South. And from the beginning their responses

to what they found differed sharply, as evidenced by the experiences of Colonel Charles G. Gunter of Marengo County, Alabama, and Andrew McCollam of Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. During the summer of 1865, the entire Gunter family, with the exception of one son, sailed for South America. In December, Gunter wrote back that he liked the climate, people, land, and government, and expected to buy a plantation with fifty to a hundred slaves soon.⁶⁵ Eight months later, he could not praise his new home lavishly enough. "Dispose of, give away and settle my affairs as if I were dead to the U.S. I shall never go there again," he told his son. He now owned six thousand acres and "enough negroes to work it," and grew not just cotton or tobacco or sugar but all three! He was busy organizing a massive colonization scheme in the Doce River region, about three hundred miles north-east of Rio de Janeiro, and asked his son to send him all the young planters he could find. He concluded confidently, "We shall be rich here."⁶⁶

Harris Gunter, a son who accompanied the family to Brazil, said, "Father thinks he has struck the place intended for him by Providence." And, indeed, Harris agreed that their only worries were "ants and a spirit of democracy among the people—no great evils in comparison with free negro labor, radicalism and taxes."⁶⁷ The entire family campaigned to convince the lone holdout to join them in Brazil. "I think you will get tired of living in any sort of connection with Yankeys," the father predicted. "I would rather have my children here naked than with 10,000\$ apiece in any part of the U.S." Face facts, he told his son. "There is no possibility of peace, comfort or a fixed government in the South for the next twenty years."⁶⁸ And, in a very short time, "we will have enough Southerners around us to furnish good society."⁶⁹

The Southern community did not materialize, at least not permanently, but Charles G. Gunter went on to achieve remarkable success and wide acclaim as a planter in Brazil.⁷⁰ While the father found almost everything he had hoped for, his son Harris did not. At the end of 1866, he was still advising his brother in Alabama to emigrate, but not to Brazil. His choice now was Argentina, for unlike Brazil, "they are free from the darkey element and from emancipation in the Future." If not to Argentina, he and his brother could go to "Chile or Oregon or Canada," for "now that we have become thoroughly uprooted in Alabama I am willing [to] try any country and to see as

much of the world as possible." 71 The father had learned to live with Brazilian ways and was prospering on the land, but the son had no passion to plant and only wanted to put space between himself and blacks.

Andrew McCollam of Louisiana was also drawn southward after the war. In May, 1866, he placed his two sons in charge of "Ellendale," armed himself with twenty letters of introduction to "the most considerable planters in the country," and sailed for Brazil. 72 He went to determine the possibility of planting sugar with slave labor. Accompanied by his brother and several neighborhood planters, he arrived in Rio de Janeiro in late June. McCollam had not idled away the hours on the long cruise. He had scrutinized the social and economic conditions of every port of call. At Saint Thomas, for example, he found "free Negroes lounging on all quarters. . . . The island is not cultivated[;] freedom [sic] destroyed all agriculture[;] at best it is but a rock." By the time he reached Rio, he had not seen a single place that was "worth a cent."

He began his investigation of the Brazilian plantation country on July 4, and almost immediately decided that "all is not gold that glitters here." While he felt "more independent . . . with an Imperial flag . . . floating over me than I could in my native land under the miserable tyranny [sic] now prevailing," he was depressed to find everywhere "the finger of decay." The soil was exhausted, the agriculture primitive, and the people backward, he concluded. He made an intensive analysis of farming methods and production rates at each plantation he visited, and at first thought the deterioration could be reversed by hard labor and skilled management, of the sort American planters could provide. He was certain that he "could do more work with the same number of hands than was being done." The endless ceremony and celebration at each stop exasperated him. "Trifling away the time of business men will impoverish any Country that lives by honest industry," he declared. He saw "more idlers and idleness" in a few weeks in Brazil than he had seen in his entire life in Louisiana. He discovered that "to a man that has been in the habite of makeing things move with some vim the motions of the people are vexatius in the extreme." 73

Even more disturbing than the decay, inefficiency, and pace of life was the state of race relations and slavery. McCollam thought social arrangements were "sickening." A sense of white mastery was missing, and everywhere he looked he found "white men & negro women all

together." In his opinion, "the negroes were the better of the two." And incredibly, the "ludest conduct is no bar to a mans entree into society such as it is." Neither race nor conduct seemed to count, he said disgustedly; only wealth mattered. 74 But in the end, McCollam rejected Brazil as a new home because of the shaky status of slavery. Throughout the back country of Rio de Janeiro province he heard talk of emancipation. One wealthy planter he met had yielded "to the prevailing impression that slavery would be abolished in less than 20 years[,] perhaps . . . in ten years." And McCollam had not the slightest doubt that with "slavery abolished in this Empire it will be the poorest country on the face of the Earth."

Even without legal emancipation, McCollam concluded, slavery in Brazil was doomed. He noted that the native planters constantly complained that the Negroes were "passing away." One planter told McCollam that there were only half as many slaves in the country as there had been in the early 1850s, when the slave trade was abolished. The Brazilian believed disease was responsible. He had begun with five hundred slaves, he explained, but despite additional purchases, only two hundred remained. McCollam thought the "rapid decline in the number of slaves" was due "chiefly to deaths being more frequent than births," but he also recognized that the small number of females made it difficult for slaves to reproduce their own numbers. The Louisianan thought the evidence was conclusive that "the black race will all disappear on this continent" in three or four generations, "even without emancipation."

McCollam was captivated by Brazil's physical beauty and would have liked to have stayed. "The Parahiba [Paraíba] resembles the Mississippi river so much that without any great flight of fancy one . . . might think . . . that he was on the great river of the north." If only a hundred "families from Louisiana could be located here and the institution of slavery insured I should think I had found a new land of promise," he said wistfully. But because slavery was crumbling, he did not have "the courage to settle." He had, in fact, even "less confidence in the future of this Country than at home." Returning to Rio, he declared angrily that the entire country ought "to be put in a bag and all thrown into the sea for the lies about Brazil." With that, he boarded a steamer and headed back to Louisiana, where he immediately fired off letters to several newspapers exploding the "Brazilian myth."

Had McCollam surveyed the new coffee lands west of São Paulo,

he would have found less racial mixture, better prospects for economic growth, and a slave population that was increasing, not decreasing. But even there, it is unlikely that he could have competed successfully with the enterprising native coffee planters.⁷⁵ One colony, organized by a Texas planter who demanded evidence that applicants were "Southern in feeling, pro-slavery in sentiment, and that they have maintained the reputation of honorable men," was established in the interior, northwest of São Paulo. But a variety of factors, including inadequate transportation and capital, resulted in its failure.⁷⁶ Only at a small colony in Santa Barbara, which survived on cotton and then on the unlikely crop of watermelons, was there even the semblance of success and an indication of the planters' ability to maintain in Brazil a group identity as conservative Southerners.⁷⁷

One other slave society was to be found in the Western hemisphere, in Cuba, but probably because it was much better known than Brazil, Cuba received much less attention from Southern planters. Andrew McCollam, however, persistent in his search for a new plantation home, visited the Spanish island less than a year after his ill-fated Brazilian adventure. "If it were not for the doubt that hangs over the future of this fine island," he concluded after a short stay, "I would be a citizen of free happy and enlightened Spain before another year." But again, because slavery was so fragile there, he would not risk emigrating.⁷⁸ Another Southerner who spent time in Cuba also thought it was "very fertile and Boundless in wealth, with slave labor." But "without it," Robert Toombs declared, "its history is already written in that of Jamaica and Hayti." And in his opinion, slavery was "doomed." England and the United States would "force Spain into the policy of emancipation."⁷⁹ A Northern newspaperman confirmed the two Southerners' suspicions. On his swing around the South after the war, Whitelaw Reid took a short side trip to Cuba, where he found that "the whole slave community is said to be fermenting with ideas engendered by American emancipation." He agreed that slavery was "doomed."⁸⁰ Very few Southerners, therefore, seriously considered Cuba as their new homeland.

In the end, Southern planters failed to recreate antebellum plantation society overseas. No foreign country really provided the proper materials, and the planters themselves were not particularly well suited for the effort. Though often planned as joint endeavors, Southern colonies tended to founder on what one disappointed emigré

described as "*individualism* utterly opposed to any concerted common action."⁸¹ Grand communal efforts were nearly as alien to planters as the new environments in which they labored. After a time, most expatriates began to look toward home. The lack of economic success prompted many to return, as did the fact that time had put to rest the worst fears which had originally spurred emigration. It is also likely that planters abroad had themselves started to change. The postwar South began to appear tolerable, not because the alterations in it had actually been insignificant, but because planters could now begin to believe that the transition from slave to free labor had not been fatal to their basic values. By 1870, most planter emigrés had found their way back to the South. Only a small remnant remained abroad, forever alienated and unreconstructed.

In planters' eyes, Appomattox meant political subjugation, social upheaval, and economic ruin. Rather than face the consequences of their loss, a considerable number fled the region. Shamed by defeat and disgusted with free blacks, they decided the South had no future, only a past. Many of those who sailed for Latin America hoped to rebuild the antebellum society which was now only a memory. But except for an occasional individual victory, the quest was marked by failure, and eventually most wandered back to the South. There they joined the majority who had stayed behind, living in the new world.

III

emigration's failure.

The first summer of peace found most Southern planters back on their plantations, face to face with what one gentleman called the "emancipation trails."⁸² However much they may have wished to flee the South, they stayed, having no realistic alternative. As a planter remarked, returning to his cotton fields, "I am obliged to try. . . . I have no other way to make money."⁸³ But disasters sometimes impose new ways of life as the price for survival. And in the ruptured plantation economy of the postwar South, the price of survival for former masters was adjustment to former slaves. The dominant theme in planters' lives became the search for a substitute for slavery. But they began their quest with no more than a glimmer of hope. "How does 'Freedom' work with you?" asked one worried Georgia planter of another in October, 1865. "It runs badly down this way for all parties," he added quickly. "No human wisdom can foresee the

issue—we are working without data—sailing on an unknown sea—without chart or compass.” In his opinion and in the opinion of his class, “It is all experiment.”⁸⁴

The South after Appomattox was a giant kaleidoscope of emotions. Lee’s surrender was “a great shock mentally and morally,” one young planter remembered. “Terror, indifference, recklessness, hope and despair” intermingled in the “agitated mind of the people.”⁸⁵ Some of the plantation gentry were stunned and immobilized. “We are almost paralyzed here,” a Georgian reported.⁸⁶ “I don’t think I fully realize my situation yet,” an Alabama woman declared eight months after the war. “I am almost tempted to doubt my self sometimes and ask if this is really I, to doubt my own identity.”⁸⁷ And another plantation mistress said she felt as if “I had lost a part of myself in losing my country.”⁸⁸ Occasionally, a planter displayed amazing ability to absorb completely the impact of defeat. James Lusk Alcorn, for instance, perceived enormous opportunity in the postwar landscape and eagerly anticipated his chances.⁸⁹ But the ravages of war and the shock of defeat were collective experiences which very few planters escaped. A majority were neither traumatized nor galvanized, but rather, exhausted by the four-year ordeal and sick at heart at their failure.

It was not simply their memory of the war that depressed them. There was also the war’s grim aftermath and a frightening future. The wretchedness of the South in 1865 was itself enough to demoralize and confuse strong men, as evidenced by the experience of Henry Watson, Jr. In November, 1865, Watson returned to his Alabama plantation after four years in Europe. He had not left the South in 1861 because he lacked sympathy with its cause. He had been accustomed to escaping the pestilential summers of Alabama by traveling to the seaside in Massachusetts, but after war broke out, he had not wanted to go north, and believing he could not safely remain in the torrid South, he had sailed for Europe. From the Continent he scrutinized every scrap of war news and fed information and advice back to his Southern friends. He proved an exceptionally intelligent and clear-eyed observer who constantly urged Alabamans to “take facts as they are.”⁹⁰ From his vantage point beyond the storm, Watson was truly a voice of reason.

He remained in Europe for a few months after the war ended and continued to send his neighbors in Alabama advice, this time about how to deal with defeat. He attacked their gloom and denounced the recalcitrance of Southern politicians. “Facts are facts,” Watson said again. “When a tornado has destroyed one[’s] crops, forests, houses, outhouses, & fences, it is the height of absurdity to sit down & lament, blame Heaven for it & assert that should not have been.” The “only course,” he told them, “is not to groan but to go to work at once to rebuild, plant, make anew.” The South risked all on the war. “It has lost,” he said. “The only thing now is to admit the failure, take things as they are, not as they should be, and set about repairing the mischief.” Southerners should think “*practically*” and salvage what they could. Put the farms back into operation, he declared. Let slavery go, for it was “lost” in the war. Take the amnesty oaths and apply for pardons. Work with the moderates in the North, lest the radicals gain ground. “Go back into the Union,” for without representation “we shall not get rid of military rule, shall not be permitted to control our negro population.”⁹¹ Confident and enthusiastic, Watson boldly outlined a plan of salvation and then in November, 1865, headed for Alabama.

Back on his plantation, Watson’s cool confidence and impressive logic deserted him. He almost wished he had remained in Europe, where he had been “so free from excitement, care and anxiety.” Thrust into the environment Southerners had endured for four years, he became confused and indecisive. His friends “daily asked for advice as to what they had better do about this or that, should they sell, should they rent, what is their property worth, what do I think & would advise about selling cotton, what about the currency, what about the political prospects, etc., etc.,” but he discovered that he no longer knew what to tell them. Everything was “in such a disorganized, uncertain condition here that no one knows what to do,” he said. “I have been in many troubles in the course of my life,” he declared only three weeks after his return, “but I never before was in one in which I did not see, or think that I saw, some way to get out. . . . I am completely at a loss now. I am completely at sea.”⁹² Calm and resolute when an outsider, Watson was bewildered by his plunge back into the post-Appomattox South.

However, the profound pessimism and anxiety which gripped

Southern planters did not usually result in drift or paralysis. Howell Cobb, for example, could say in September, "The present is as blank and the future as full of doubts and perplexities as our worst enemy could desire it to be." But at the same time, he was unwilling merely to wander about aimlessly. He would, at least, seek some path through the difficulties. "I have advised my friends," Cobb replied to an inquiry from another Georgia planter, "to yield to our destiny with the best possible grace—recognize as a fixed fact the abolition of slavery—conform in all respects to the new state of things—cooperate in the early restoration of our state to civil government. . . . take the amnesty oath when permitted to do it. . . . apply for special pardons. . . . and make up their minds to live out their future days in the Old Union." ⁹³ That the majority of the South's planters adopted Cobb's strategy—submitting to defeat, putting the issues of the war behind them, and responding practically to realities—was clear to most contemporaries. ⁹⁴

The small knot of planters who refused to recognize the new order were enraged by the majority who had. In the eyes of these unreconstructed rebels, an acceptance of unalterable reality was a betrayal of old trusts. They had no intention of adapting to the New South. There was only one proper stance—faithful allegiance to slavery and steadfast resistance to Yankees. A Georgian who refused to give up his slaves throughout the summer of 1865 declared that Southerners were "pusillanimous wretches," who acted the part of "the whipt Spaniel[,] Kissing the hand that smits them . . . bowing at the footstool of power . . . singing hosannas to the union." ⁹⁵ A recalcitrant Virginian railed against those who had "fallen down in adoration of the 'golden calf.'" He complained that planters were rushing "to save property and person," scrambling to "take oaths and secure pardon," willing to acknowledge anything, whether they were "traitors or devils." Rather than "hugging the chains" that bound the South, he would resist. "I will not lie & say that the north had a lawful right to take my slaves," he shouted. "It was unconstitutional confiscation." ⁹⁶ Most planters would have agreed that might did not necessarily make right, but they also understood that the military might of the North had established the parameters of the possible in the postwar South.

Willingness to adjust to radically changed circumstances did not mean planters had abandoned their traditional views. Nor did their

co-operation
+
competition

Bricks without Straw

among postwar P.
135

attitude spring from an optimistic appraisal of their chances of restoring their plantations with free black labor. Planters openly admitted that they were grasping at straws. Many feared that they were merely postponing inevitable collapse. Even though they had consistently equated plantations with slavery, the Southern gentry could not acquiesce in the final destruction of the plantations now that slavery was gone. Preservation of their plantations had dictated their behavior for decades, and most were flexible and resilient enough in 1865 to make yet another effort. As grim as the thought was, they had to contemplate plantation agriculture without slavery.

Emancipation so disrupted the plantation South that planters found themselves in ambivalent relationships not only with blacks but also with one another. Before the war, planters had been bound together by their class interests and by the problems common to all slaveholders. But in the postwar years, relations became strained—co-operative and competitive at the same time. On the one hand, they all faced the same series of difficulties in seeking to restore their plantations, and few were confident enough to go entirely their own way. Even before the war ended, planters in Amite County, Mississippi, began meeting together to discuss how to handle freedmen "so as to have order." ⁹⁷ After Appomattox, planters often organized in county associations, hoping their unity on wage scales and share arrangements would undermine the bargaining power of blacks. ⁹⁸ Individual planters continued to seek out others for advice and instruction. One week before hiring time, a Virginian prepared for a trip to the Albemarle and Louisa county courthouses, where he intended to talk with other planters about how they "manage this business," about "how they determine prices, time, etcetera." ⁹⁹ William H. Heyward of Charleston burrowed into works on European political economy in his search for solutions to Southern agricultural problems, but he also carried on an extensive correspondence with "practical gentlemen." ¹⁰⁰

But while planters sometimes moved co-operatively, they were also caught up in fierce competition. Polite conventions were stripped away as they battled one another for scarce resources, human and material. Slavery had united the gentry, but free labor threatened to splinter them. "The competition is frightful & the planters are literally cutting one another's throats," one South Carolinian reported in 1866. ¹⁰¹ A Louisiana sugar grower complained that cotton planters

from Mississippi had swept through his neighborhood seeking to woo freedmen away with extravagant promises. "I am afraid that if cotton planters are successful," he said, "sugar planters will not be able to get hands next year."¹⁰² An Alabaman concluded that the "more like a negro the Employer is the greater has been his success in getting hands." According to his experience, the "best masters have made the greatest failures and an impossible fellow with a bottle of whiskey and liberal promises can entice all labor from any one of them."¹⁰³ The problem was severe enough for several states to include penalties for "enticing" in the so-called Black Codes, which began to be introduced toward the end of 1865, but competition for workers continued.

Competition not only made it difficult to get and keep labor, but also, many claimed, ruined what labor was obtainable. "Negroes doing generally badly," a Texas planter noted in September, 1866. "High wages offered by *asses* has turned their heads." Moreover, competition between planters seemed to destroy community standards for labor. The Texan complained that he could not get his field hands to pick "clean cotton." They know other freedmen pick "trash," he explained, and "think I am hard to please."¹⁰⁴ A similar report came from a young rice planter in South Carolina. "The negroes do pretty much as they please," he said, "and laugh at threats of dismissal as there are any number of places where they can go and do as they please."¹⁰⁵

Whether they acted collectively to meet the black challenge or separately in private searches for black labor, planters faced similar problems in reorganizing their plantations and resuming staple production. On one level, the preservation of the plantation in the postwar South depended, as it always had, on the successful application of management skills to land, labor, and capital. But the typical planter emerged from the war in control of only one of this triad. He could say with John S. Dobbins of Georgia, "I have got little left now, only my land."¹⁰⁶ And throughout the South, land values had declined sharply. In addition, the land had frequently been devastated. The bayou country of Louisiana was "ruined almost entirely," one planter reported. In his neighborhood there was "not a house, fence or even vestige [*sic*] of Civilization."¹⁰⁷ Worse off still were those few who returned home to find that they had lost even their land. The Freedmen's Bureau, established in March, 1865, to help the freedmen move from slavery to freedom, seized some plantations

as "abandoned lands." The government sequestered others under the Confiscation Acts or for nonpayment of taxes. And even planters who managed to hold on to their lands were anxious because of the rumor that Congress was about to give each freedman forty acres and a mule. They knew full well that if this occurred, at least the forty acres would be cut from their property.

Staple production required substantial amounts of capital, but as Henry L. Graves said, "The smash up left every body in this country flat."¹⁰⁸ Thomas T. Munford returned to his Virginia plantation "without a cent," and once there, "found nothing to sell."¹⁰⁹ Planters needed cash for immediate necessities, as well as for unpaid taxes, debts, and interest. The McBee family of North Carolina, for example, emerged from the war with more than twenty thousand dollars in debts, stretching back to antebellum slave purchases.¹¹⁰ John Berkley Grimball owed more than ten thousand dollars in accumulated interest alone.¹¹¹ Those few planters who had successfully hidden cotton were in fine shape, for when Southern ports were thrown open, they made fortunes. A. H. Boykin of South Carolina sent a whopping 460 bales of cotton to his Charleston factor, who sold it for an average of fifty cents a pound.¹¹² Others had nonagricultural investments they could draw on. Lewis Thompson of North Carolina sold bonds worth twenty-one thousand dollars to put his plantations back into running order.¹¹³ But most Southern planters had far more debts and Confederate currency than cotton and bonds, and the summer of 1865 saw a mad scramble for credit.

Moreover, planters at this time often found labor as scarce as capital. Freedmen everywhere had greeted emancipation by abandoning their slave cabins and taking to the roads, escaping former masters, seeking families, or merely experiencing the feel of freedom under their feet. On some places not a single black remained. A Louisianan said in September, 1865, that there were "*immense* tracts of the most valuable land vacant in consequence of the disappearance of the negroes. . . ." ¹¹⁴ And even when blacks stayed on, planters discovered, they tested their freedom by getting out to the fields hours late, by refusing to work on Saturdays, and in scores of other ways. George W. Munford of Virginia reported that he was using "all sorts of expedients" to "seduce" work from his laborers but that they were "without the activity to jump Jim Crow."¹¹⁵ Few would have disputed G. E. Manigault's declaration that the "system of labor on

plantations is completely disorganized." 116

While the task facing the planters was familiar in one way, it was radically different in another. Emancipation had introduced a new factor, the freedman. Planters agreed that the future of the South's plantations rested upon the behavior of free black labor, and, universally, they referred to free labor as "the experiment." There were several shades of opinion in 1865 about its chances of success. Here and there a maverick optimist could be found. "In casting ahead in thought for future employment I see nothing more profitable or agreeable than farming," Everard Green Baker of Mississippi declared that summer. When he bought a second plantation in September, he said forthrightly that it was "an experiment in freed labor," but admitted that "all seem to think I have done wrong & that it will prove a failure." 117

Certainly, as the Mississippian realized, the bulk of planter opinion was negative. "No planter sees any way by the present lights to make usefull [sic] laborers out of free negroes," an informed Alabaman reported in July, 1865, although, he added, "prices of cotton may tempt the experiment." 118 The pessimism of planters reached its most dismal level among the many who believed that blacks would not even exist in the South much longer. Without the paternal protection of slavery, they could not survive, much less work. "Where shall Othello go?" asked one planter. "Poor elk—poor bufaloe—poor Indian—poor Nigger—this is indeed a white man country." 119 Would blacks labor without the lash? Could they even avert extinction without masters? These questions were on planters' lips in 1865. Although their answers were usually in the negative, even the most despairing were rarely free to act upon their fears. Buyers of ramshackle estates were scarce, crops were already in the ground by summer, and planters could only hope to hold on to whatever labor they had.

The Federal Government, too, was eager to keep the freedmen on the plantations. There, at least, they would be fed and housed and off the government's relief rolls. The task of supervising the transition from one labor system to another in the South fell to the Freedmen's Bureau. Building upon the labor program developed during the war by the Federal military, the Bureau launched a vigorous campaign in the summer of 1865 to bind black laborers and planters by contracts which would cover the remainder of the season. 120

Planters signed the contracts in 1865, but they rarely expressed confidence that the agreements would resolve their labor problem. The Bureau did in fact provide planters with important services, just as had the Federal army during early Reconstruction in the Mississippi valley, and contracts did prove the steppingstone to renewed planter authority over labor. But in 1865 the Bureau's services were only recognized as valuable by planters who had faith in the new labor system. Those still rooted in the master-slave relationship, those still seeking the prerogatives of masterhood, did not regard the Bureau as offering any vital service. In the immediate postwar years, most planters viewed contracts as the measure of the revolution that emancipation had brought to the South. Contracts represented the consummation of the blacks' transformation from slaves to freedmen. 121

Planters believed that contracts impinged more on them than on blacks. The Bureau's regulations in Alabama, for instance, required employers to put away the whip and to provide food, clothing, shelter, and medical care, in addition to wages or shares. 122 Contracts actually made enormous demands upon blacks, but planters responded that the labor provisions were only as good as their enforcement. Blacks could not be expected to voluntarily fulfill the agreements, they reasoned, and real authority was now vested in the Freedmen's Bureau. And most doubted that the Bureau would actually compel freedmen to labor. In his county, a Texan said in 1867, the Bureau was "totally inefficient." For blacks "to violate a contract now is no offence," he declared. 123 Many saw the Bureau as meddling and dangerous. In March, 1866, another Texan cheered President Andrew Johnson's veto of "that most rascally Freedman's Bureau Bill." In his opinion, the Bureau was "the abolitionists' programme to drive the white men of the South into open antagonism with the Negro. . . ." 124 Many planters believed that the officers of the Bureau were actually Negrophiles. "The negro is a sacred animal," Samuel Andrew Agnew of Mississippi said in disgust. "The Yankees are about negroes like the Egyptians were about cats." 125

What planters believed they needed to insure black performance was not a Freedmen's Bureau but a comprehensive labor code, molded to their needs. Without bold state legislation, Robert Toombs declared from his exile in Havana, the South "must abandon the application of capital to agriculture except on two hundred acre (or less) holdings. That is, we must come to the tenant system of

Europe."¹²⁶ "Unless Southerners are permitted to enact stringent apprenticeship acts which will be rigidly carried out," Frederick G. Skinner of Virginia asserted, "we will find ourselves saddled with four millions of paupers[,] vagrants and rogues."¹²⁷ Striking a more benevolent tone, another Virginian demanded "some system by which the poor creatures can be kept from the sad fate which must be theirs if left to their resources for livelihood and employment."¹²⁸ Southerners had always believed that labor and race relations were too important to be left to individuals, and in 1865 they began to devise a new system, put into effect through the so-called Black Codes.

That autumn, Southern legislatures started adopting detailed codes regulating labor in their states. Officially, the aim of the codes was to "guard them [blacks] and the State against any evils that may arise from their sudden emancipation," a goal consistent with the antebellum image of blacks as both immature and primitive. The immediate effect of the codes, however, was to channel blacks back to the plantations, and, once they were there, to coerce labor from them. Regulations varied from state to state, but most made vagrancy a criminal offense. South Carolina went further, prohibiting blacks from working outside domestic service and agriculture and making the violation of a labor contract a serious criminal act. Charles Sumner thought the codes were a blatant attempt at "semi-peonage," but planters believed they were absolutely necessary. In the behavior of blacks, they said, lay the key to the future of the South.¹²⁹

concern over *controlling freedmen's labor*
The efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau, state legislatures, and planters, in conjunction with the freedmen's own miseries, succeeded in driving most blacks off the roads and back into plantation cabins by 1866. But the flurry of activity had not created a permanent new labor system. Federal officials soon disallowed the Black Codes, and in 1866 only the roughest outline of a new labor arrangement was apparent. The critical interior lines of the system would have to be drawn in on thousands of separate plantations across the South. Planters felt they had no pertinent experience, no usable past, to draw upon. They had only a set of assumptions about blacks and agriculture. They were convinced that blacks did not respond to the same inducements as whites. Blacks were like children—improvident, oblivious to the future, unable to appreciate the obligations of a contract, incapable of accepting the responsibilities freedom had bestowed

upon them. The quest for the restoration of prosperity and order on the plantations had many facets, but the dominant concern was the freedman.

IV

Intent on holding their plantations together but not sure how to accomplish it, planters set about experimenting with new arrangements, moving ahead by trial and error, hoping to find a system that worked. "All the traditions and habits of both races had been suddenly overthrown," a Tennessee planter remembered, "and neither knew just what to do, or how to accommodate themselves to the new situation."¹³⁰ Planters were no longer free to organize plantations as they wished, for now the desires of freedmen and of the Federal Government entered the equation. With traditional relationships all askew, the restoration and rehabilitation of the plantation proved almost as much a social as an economic problem. After more than two years of effort, however, the vast majority of planters believed they had been unsuccessful in their search for an adequate substitute for slavery. Planters and freedmen were still floundering about in 1867, and the rural South remained disordered, unstable, and poor. In most planters' minds, free black labor had proven a failure.

Self-interest demanded that planters do everything they could to make the new labor system work, and most threw themselves into the task with feverish intensity. They sought to be realistic and practical, but their early efforts clearly reflected their continued faith in slavery. As Cary Charles Cocke of Virginia remarked in August, 1867, planters' ideas were still the product of "observation & practice under the old system of cultivation."¹³¹ Their inability to give up their preference for compulsory service meant that they strove to reinstitute their authority in the freedmen's lives and labor. Rebuilding plantations along familiar lines required the continuation of work gangs, white supervision, task systems, clustered cabins, and minimal personal freedom for blacks. Subsistence and regimentation were the planters' goals. Unable to accept the implications of emancipation, they sought to keep blacks as nearly slaves as possible.

There could be no return to the old plantation, however. For one thing, the Freedmen's Bureau was there to guard against black re-enslavement. For another, blacks themselves now sought to supply

more than muscle in the reconstruction of Southern agriculture. In thousands of separate plantation arenas, landowners without laborers confronted laborers without land. Blacks and planters were in a constant tug of war over the freedmen's responsibilities. "Pa wants his hirelings to do anything he wants," Samuel Andrew Agnew of Mississippi reported in November, 1865, but "George wants to hire to make a crop only." ¹³² In the opinion of a bitter South Carolinian, freedmen had acquired "the notion that they are part proprietors." ¹³³ Blacks were determined to remove the vestiges of slavery. If they could not yet legally share the land, they wanted at least to share in decisions about how they would farm the land. They objected to the continuation of gang and task labor and to planters' involvement in their personal lives. They demanded to work independently and to be free from constant white supervision. They demanded, in other words, that planters accept emancipation and trust in free black labor. ¹³⁴

Planters were determined to keep their plantations from breaking up, and almost no one would sell land to blacks. Many even refused to rent. Renting to Negroes was "very injurious to the best interests of the community," a Georgian claimed. ¹³⁵ Planters had no desire to further economic democracy, white or black, and no confidence that freedmen could farm successfully independent of whites. A survey of Cooper River, South Carolina, planters in February, 1866, revealed that a majority had managed to retain slave-style gang labor and were giving shares of the crop as compensation. As one Cooper River gentleman explained, planters adopted the practice of paying in shares because they were short of cash with which to pay wages and also because they hoped an interest in the crop would make for a steadier, livelier work force. ¹³⁶ The share system was widespread in the South in 1865 and 1866, but it was unstable. Freedmen sought independence, not gang labor and shares. If they could not own land, then they wanted to rent land, and if they could not rent, then they hoped to sharecrop.

Although wage labor survived in the cotton South, sharecropping gradually came to dominate. It proved the primary means of bringing together landowners without capital and laborers without land. Sharecropping was a compromise, and it satisfied neither planters nor freedmen. It offered blacks more freedom than the labor gangs, but less than owning land or renting; it offered planters a means of resuming production and of exercising some supervision, but less

leverage over labor than they desired or believed necessary. Forces were at work which would eventually produce a degree of uniformity in the cotton South, but for a number of years labor arrangements continued to resemble the region's well-known patchwork quilts—a display of almost infinite variety. "On twenty plantations around me," an Arkansas gentleman observed a year after the war, "there are ten different styles of contracts." ¹³⁷ While sharecropping presaged the future, planters were unable to recognize any permanence. They perceived only confusion and flux in early Reconstruction agriculture and were convinced that nothing they saw could restore the grandeur of the plantations.

The search for a replacement for slavery involved more than comparing the profits and losses of various economic arrangements. Slavery had defined both economic and social systems, and the introduction of free labor meant that both labor and race relationships had to be redrawn. "Old owners and overseers have much to learn," and Negroes "have as much to learn before they can understand their new positions," an Alabaman observed in December, 1865. ¹³⁸ Individuals accustomed to dealing successfully with blacks as slaves often found themselves unable to deal with them as freedmen. "I am not fit to manage negroes now, at least hired servants," a woman in Alabama declared. "They, nor I either, are prepared for the changes in our situation." ¹³⁹ A North Carolinian agreed. "I have done many disagreeable [sic] things in my life but very few more so than to hire freedmen," he said. "They ask so many questions." ¹⁴⁰

Extensive experience in the old regime did tend to make adaptation to the new regime more difficult. Older planters by the score washed their hands of plantation management, turning over administrative duties to younger men. James Baker of Florida made his son manager of his plantation, reasoning that the younger Baker held "his temper and gets along better with the freedmen." ¹⁴¹ A planter in Greensboro, Alabama, wrote his nephew that cotton plantations could be sold there on advantageous terms. "Most of the old planters are disposed to abandon the business in part at least," he reported. "That they are turning over their lands, teams, provisions, etc. to young men & receive a share of the crop by way of rent." ¹⁴²

The shock of black freedom affected young and old alike, however. A Georgian observed in August, 1865, the "dark, dissolving, quieting wave of emancipation" succeeded in "withering and

deadening the best sensibilities of master and servant.”¹⁴³ Embittered by the results of the war, soured by insubordinate black behavior, or merely quick to take advantage of new economic opportunity, planters often displayed a callous disregard for the welfare of former bondsmen in the reorganization of their plantations. Of course, the economic realities of participation in the world’s commercial market place had always threatened the realization of the Southern ideal of a patriarchal and paternalistic master. The result had been, in Eugene Genovese’s words, a “bastard slavery,” a hybrid of paternalism and crass economic exploitation.¹⁴⁴ Yet, as antebellum planters had realized, paternalism and profit-seeking were not mutually exclusive. Paternalistic behavior was sometimes encouraged by rational economic motives. It made economic sense to be personally involved in the care of scarce and valuable black labor/capital. It made sense to encourage vigorous work through rewards and positive incentives. It made sense to seek to minimize problems of labor control by encouraging black gratitude for planters’ kindnesses. Of course, some planters never behaved paternalistically. Others, having acquired paternalistic sensibilities, never lost them. But for the majority, while paternalism had once been an important element in the treatment of black labor, after 1865 it decayed, sometimes to the point of utter insignificance in plantation life.

The effort to adjust from the paternalistic relationships associated with slavery to the purely contractual relationships associated with compensated labor became a dominant theme in the reorganization of plantation agriculture after the war. The realities of the economic world pushed especially hard; and without the restraints bred of ownership of labor, without the façade of black subservience and affection, without the advantages of black production, paternalism had few buttresses. Under the radically altered circumstances, in fact, profit-seeking apparently did not even allow, much less encourage, paternalistic concern for black welfare. Lacking recourse to corporal punishment or stringent state labor codes, planters had no choice but to rely upon the coercions of the market place to motivate black labor. The harshness of the competitive free market—with its ultimate sanction of starvation—was the only leverage available. Benevolent behavior toward blacks could no longer encourage productivity or increase control. Planters believed that it could only insulate freedmen from the consequences of economic irresponsibility and encourage their natural proclivity to indolence.

The behavior of considerable numbers of planters demonstrated that they believed that the law which freed the slaves also freed the masters. For them, all obligations deriving from the relationship of master and slave had ceased to exist. Henceforth, their relationships with freedmen would be determined by the letter of the labor contract. Tough-mindedness about labor matters was a necessity, a young South Carolinian declared, “if the plantation is to be money making and not a charitable institution.” The place to begin, he suggested, was in “culling” the labor force.¹⁴⁵ That some planters were following that policy was clear to another South Carolinian, who observed that his neighbors were “hauling them out below here & putting them down in the Road—bad weather for outdoor living.”¹⁴⁶ Expelling the old and sick, underpaying or totally refusing to pay the young and able—this did not become everyone’s new standard, but it did become common.

Because the “illegal abolition” of slavery was forced on the South “by the strong hand of military power,” reasoned a Virginia planter two months after Appomattox, Southerners were “in no wise responsible for it.” Absolved from responsibility for emancipation, Southerners were also absolved from responsibility for the consequences of emancipation. “All feeling must be discarded,” he argued. “Our own interests, although it result in [the freedmen’s] total ruin and annihilation, must alone dictate the course for us to pursue.” Survival in this hostile, unwanted world required “a judicious & thorough reorganization of the slaves [sic] upon the plantations, selecting those best calculated & qualified to promote our own & their own interests by affording a steady & reliable supply of labour & discarding all who do not come up to these requirements.” Even then, he was not optimistic. Because the minds of blacks were filled with “visions that money will come to them without working . . . nothing short of [the] starvation of many of them & their families will ever open their eyes to truths. . . .” And the survivors might still be “more trouble than their services are worth, if some compulsion of some kind is not brought to bear, besides the tenure we now have over them.” He suspected that the final consequence of emancipation would be “the substitution of white instead of black labor.”¹⁴⁷

Adopting a similar logic, a Mississippi planter declared in the summer of 1865 that his aim was to make his former bondsmen “wholly self-sustaining.” The freedman would have to learn the lesson of hard work, he said. “If he does not, he cannot eat *my* bread

and meat or wear my clothes . . . a proper allowance should be made for house rent, garden space, wood, milk and butter and feeding his poultry from my corn crib . . . in the amount of money wages paid to him." Having read blacks out of the plantation family and denied the paternalistic tradition, he had apparently moved to full acceptance of the principles of contractual free labor. But as in many of his colleagues, his conversion to laissez-faire capitalism was incomplete. Actually, he had little faith in the effectiveness of the market place in making blacks work. In his opinion, planters still required the master's power of coercion. The best means of assuring planters that authority, he believed, was for the state government to designate each plantation a separate town and each planter "a judge of police, with power to sentence and inflict."¹⁴⁸

Because emancipation altered drastically the economic relationships on Southern plantations, it impinged on paternalism. Paternalistic sensibilities were also challenged by rapidly changing black behavior. Planters now usually perceived not what they considered good and faithful service, but instead insubordination and ungratefulness. "They are obviously changing in character every day," William Henry Stiles of Georgia observed in September, 1865.¹⁴⁹ And as black behavior evolved, white attitudes kept pace. In the early summer, Catherine Edmondston of North Carolina expressed pity for her former bondsmen and spoke warmly of their "affectionate cheerful simplicity of manner and speech." But a few weeks later the freedmen had become "discontented and moody." Soon they were "ceaselessly trying their new chains, seeing how little work they can accomplish & yet be fed and endeavoring to be both slave & free at the same moment—a slave on the food, shelter, & clothing question but free where labour is concerned." Simple freedom no longer satisfied them, she declared, for now they wanted "their master's land." "Red Republicanism" had finally linked arms with "Black Republicanism."¹⁵⁰ Freedom, quite simply, had ruined good Negroes, and for bad Negroes she had little sympathy.

The metamorphosis of Mary Jones of Liberty County, Georgia, took considerably longer. Like her late husband, the Reverend C. C. Jones, who was known as the "Apostle to the Blacks" because of his evangelical work among slaves, Mrs. Jones displayed a deep concern for the welfare of the black people on her three plantations. She consistently went beyond what was required of her in the labor

contracts, providing freedmen with free milk, meat, and syrup, and sometimes even cooking things for them in her own kitchen. But eventually, she encountered behavior she considered outrageous. Disrespectful language, impertinent gestures, and inadequate labor all began to erode her sympathy. Finally, in May, 1866, two black laborers had her hauled before the Freedmen's Bureau, where they accused her of trickery in labor contracts. She won her case, and returning to the plantation, she promptly called all the freedmen together. As she remembered, "I told the people that in doubting my word they offered me the greatest insult I ever received in my life; that I have considered them friends and treated them as such . . . but now they were only laborers under contract, and only the law would rule between us, and I would require every one of them to come up to the mark in their duty on the plantation."¹⁵¹

Paternalism declined but by no means entirely disappeared in the early Reconstruction years. A sense of obligation sometimes outlasted the shock of emancipation. "What I shall do with mine is a question that troubles me day & night," Dolly Burge of Georgia declared in May, 1865. "It is my last thought at night & the first in the morning," she said. "I told them several days ago that they were free to do as they liked, but it is my duty to make some provisions for them. . . . They are old & young[,] not profitable to hire[,] & what provision shall I make for them[?]"¹⁵² Some planters continued to pride themselves on the benevolent and self-sacrificing care they extended to blacks. In November, 1866, S. Porcher Gaillard of South Carolina allowed two elderly blacks, both former slaves of his, to move into a cabin on his plantation. He did it against his better judgment, for he knew that a neighbor had run them off his property for failing to fulfill their labor contracts.¹⁵³ As the planters' struggles to maintain status, wealth, and pride intensified, the pressures on paternalism grew.

Whatever their attitudes toward the freedmen, planters agreed that their primary task was extracting labor from them. Strategies differed widely. William Cooper of Mississippi had never shirked violence in dealing with slaves, and he continued after emancipation to whip blacks in his cotton fields.¹⁵⁴ An overseer for the Howell Cobb family believed a slightly less violent method might succeed. "I think I will get Som of them by not feeding them which proses is now going on though tha is rather two mutch fruit and green corn to have good effect."¹⁵⁵ Andrew McCollam of Louisiana used food more posi-

tively. He directed his son to plant several acres of turnips, reasoning that no Negro would leave the place with one of his favorite foods ripening before his eyes.¹⁵⁶ A Georgian suggested another tactic. "What we have to do is, as far as practicable, to make the Negroes content and happy, and induce them in the present change in their status to realize the obligations devolved upon them."¹⁵⁷ Because planters believed making blacks work was a difficult problem, they expended enormous energy seeking a solution.

Regardless of how ruthlessly or benevolently they treated their labor, planters were rarely able to overcome all the obstacles that stood between them and renewed prosperity. While taxes and interest rates rose, land values and cotton prices plummeted. In addition to the Federal tax on cotton which remained in effect until 1868, new state taxes were a heavy and unprecedented burden. Credit was both scarce and expensive. From southern Georgia came the report that planters there were abandoning their places because they could not find credit enough to buy provisions for another year's farming.¹⁵⁸ Those fortunate enough to secure credit sometimes paid charges as high as 3 percent a month, despite legal ceilings on interest rates. Land values, upon which planters relied for mortgages and credit, slid downward almost as relentlessly as the price of cotton. Nature also got in its blows. Floods and storms demolished healthy cane and cotton crops in both 1866 and 1867. The backdrop for the entire effort in agriculture, moreover, was the political confusion of early Reconstruction. As long as politicians continued to move the pieces around, planters found it difficult to put them back together. And, of course, there was the planters' own inability or unwillingness to fully accept free black labor. Their expectations of failure could hardly have increased the new labor system's chances of success.

Wealth had not entirely deserted the Southern countryside, of course, but tales of success were as rare as pairs of matched mules.¹⁵⁹ As one gentleman remarked, "Old Mother Fortune is a sad old bitch, blindfolded indeed, nothing blindfolded could make such sure licks."¹⁶⁰ A visitor to Natchez observed that the nabobs were now "not worth a cent." They "hold proud heads tho', and the ladies look lovely, and the men drink whiskey, same as before." But "all of them talk, even smell, of 'burnt cotton.'" ¹⁶¹ And soon legend would outstrip the reality of poverty. Many young Southerners would grow up hearing tales of those dark days: of white women who did their own washing in the attic and never hung their clothes outside for fear of

being seen working; of old families entertaining guests and assigning one of the daughters to blacken her face and hands to serve the food; of prominent people calling on their neighbors on some pretext just at mealtime and graciously accepting their hospitality; of gentlemen who did not know how to work and were too proud to learn.¹⁶²

Hard times did indeed force a number of planters out of the managerial class and into the ranks of labor. John C. Calhoun had once declared, "No Southern man, not even the poorest, will, under any circumstances, submit to perform menial labor. . . . He has too much pride for that."¹⁶³ During the war, however, the *Southern Cultivator* had predicted that the time would come "when it will no longer be a disgrace for a rich man's son to be seen in his shirt sleeves, and the sweat from honest, hard work pouring down his face."¹⁶⁴ And after Appomattox, soft-handed sons, and even their fathers, did sometimes find themselves trudging along behind broken-down mules. One woman expressed surprise when she heard that her cousin had become "a plough boy," but then added that she ought to have known better than doubt "anything that speaks of the poverty of the *Southern aristocrat*."¹⁶⁵ The most prominent names in the South were included among the manual laborers. A former mayor of Savannah, his wife reported, was "hard at work" with "his hands hard and burnt like a common laborer's."¹⁶⁶ A former Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia worked on his plantation in the "triple capacity of gentleman, overseer, and Cuffee Freedman." At sixty-three years of age, he said, he was "just in the full tide of the experiment whether I can compete with Cuffee as a day Laborer or not."¹⁶⁷

Plantation mistresses had never led very leisurely lives, and after emancipation their days were often filled with heavy physical labor. Because house servants were usually the first to leave and the last to return, housework fell to the white woman. "Pa was out today hunting a cook and washer but had no success," a young Mississippian reported in January, 1866. Negroes considered the position of servant "a servile one," he said, and "we must do our own work as we have been doing now for some time."¹⁶⁸ "When I get through with the day's work," one plantation woman declared in June, 1866, "I am tired enough to enjoy the bed."¹⁶⁹ After a few months without servants, a West Virginia woman moaned, "I am broken down now. . . . my life is one of incessant toil."¹⁷⁰ Masters and mistresses alike would have agreed with the woman who said in 1866, "The war was truly a time of plenty in comparasion [*sic*] to this," ¹⁷¹ and with the man who

declared in 1867, "The time is at hand here when every fellow has to root mighty hard for his provisions." ¹⁷²

Rooting was not pleasant, certainly, but planters at first actually prided themselves in their ability to meet the challenge. However, poverty and physical labor were difficult for people conditioned to wealth and ease. The physical tasks were exhausting and the social consequences galling. Despite drastic social dislocation the stigma of poverty and manual work had not entirely disappeared. Godfrey Barnsley, a down-and-out planter from Georgia, revealed his fears when he explained how difficult it was "to economize to the utmost extent" and "at the same time keep up appearance." ¹⁷³ An Alabaman estimated that nearly all of his state's aristocracy were "uncomfortably embarrassed" and would be "unable to conceal this much longer." ¹⁷⁴ One new recruit to field work explained its consequences. "I take the hoe & work all day, & as the weather has been hot . . . the exposure to the sun on my neck has blistered it smartly." ¹⁷⁵ Poverty was, then, quite literally making planters into red necks. But it was the long-term social effects of poverty, the social sunburn, that more deeply disturbed the gentry.

When John G. Guignard's wife presented him with a new son in 1867, he noted that the youngster "promises to suite the times, haveing [sic] remarkably large hands as if he might one day be able to hold plough handles." ¹⁷⁶ He almost certainly meant the remark sarcastically, for all across the South, planters were casting about for means by which their sons could escape agriculture. Before the war, James H. Hammond had said, "Planting in this country is the only independent and really honorable occupation." ¹⁷⁷ White Southerners had whistled a little jingle:

All I want in this creation
Is a pretty little wife and a big plantation.

Planting was more than a vocation; it provided status. But after Appomattox what a man needed was a job. "Owning a handsome blue grass farm—a rich inheritance—turns out to be like owning so much blue sky," young Randall Lee Gibson complained in February, 1867. ¹⁷⁸ Often it was more like having a millstone around the neck. James M. Willcox even asserted that "the more land one holds the worse off he is." ¹⁷⁹ It was in their consideration of their sons' futures

that Southern planters displayed their deepest misgivings about the future of plantation agriculture.

Fathers began actively seeking positions for their sons outside the world of the plantation. The professions had always been honorable, but now the list of acceptable positions lengthened considerably. Henry Watson, Jr., was on the lookout for a place for his eldest son, something "where he will make a business man." ¹⁸⁰ "What to do with a host of boys is a source of anxiety indeed," a Virginian declared. "None of my boys care[s] for books—and what trade to put them at is difficult to decide. . . ." ¹⁸¹ John Berkley Grimball of South Carolina sent inquiries to a London mercantile house. "I dont know if John would like Mercantile life," he admitted, "but I think he will require some means of support." The elders resisted some occupations, but their resistance crumbled rather easily. When another of Grimball's sons decided to open a country store and become a furnishing agent for a large plantation, his father was upset, but he realized that "he had better do this than be completely idle." ¹⁸² When John G. Guignard's son informed him that he was going to become a traveling salesman, his father objected because "the business of drumming" was so "demoralizing." In the end, however, he let his son go because "the business will be so remunerating to him." ¹⁸³

The sons, too, were eager to carve out a niche for themselves in the postwar economy. They were enthusiastic, but not about Southern agriculture. After only a few months of what seemed to him hopeless struggle on his late father's Georgia plantation, John Floyd King dropped everything and headed for New York. "One thing only is before me," he said in anticipation, "labor and success." ¹⁸⁴ In June, 1867, Thomas Barrow announced to his father, who had once owned three hundred slaves, that he was going into the commission business in Savannah. "I think that I see money in it," he exclaimed. ¹⁸⁵ When William Minor's son returned to Louisiana after the war, he was "anxious to get to work at something in which there is no need of negroes." ¹⁸⁶ Some youths jettisoned their lifelong ambitions. "The plan of life I have chalked out for myself is the independent, innocent one of planter," Henry L. Graves had written home in 1862 from a Confederate army camp. "I want to be entirely independent of all persons," he explained, "free to go & come when I wish, subject to no man's or community of men's caprices." He returned to Georgia after

the war to take charge of his family's estates, but by January, 1866, he was desperate to get out of the plantation and into the practice of law. He felt "chained hand & feet by the management of the estate," he confided to his sister.¹⁸⁷ The life of a postwar planter had not fulfilled his dreams; it was not even tolerable.

The elders themselves did not always turn a blind eye to the business world. For many, business had never been an alien concern, but rather had occupied a minor and subordinate position. Antebellum planters had engaged in a variety of entrepreneurial activities, and many could be described as hyphenates—planter-lawyers, planter-merchants, planter-land speculators. After the war, as their agricultural endeavors grew less rewarding—materially, psychologically, and socially—a considerable number moved into towns to give increased attention to their more remunerative interests. Agricultural poverty left them little choice but to redirect some of their energies. "Farming is pleasant enough with money to keep the wheels greased," George W. Munford explained after the war, "but when they creak & squeal it is a confounded jarring & grating sensation."¹⁸⁸

While many expressed a desire to escape the plantations, relatively few succeeded. Often untrained for anything else, with nothing but their land and their agricultural experience, they for the most part remained on the land. There, despite their best efforts, they usually failed to restore the antebellum standard of prosperity. The causes of economic failure were complex—war had devastated the economy, emancipation had destroyed the labor system, Reconstruction churned the political waters—but planters almost to a man had a single simple explanation of what had gone wrong. Very early on they had established their position. "This year will test whether they can be relied upon as Laborers," a Florida planter said in 1866.¹⁸⁹ A Texas planter tagged 1866 "the test year."¹⁹⁰ By regarding their efforts to restore the plantation economy as resting entirely on what they called the "experiment" of free labor, planters provided themselves with a handy yardstick with which to evaluate the results. When production lagged and plantations failed to return much profit, they could only conclude, as they had anticipated, that free black labor was a failure.

Planters grumbled about taxes and cotton prices, government interference and military oppression, but their discussions always returned to the inability of black people to respond to anything less than the coercions of slavery. "The true cause of the shortage of the cotton crop

is the inefficiency of the labor & the impossibility of managing it," an Alabaman declared in December, 1867.¹⁹¹ In the opinion of a Georgian, planting had become a "very hazardous business because of the difficulty of finding laborers, the expense of free labor," and "the uncertainty of being able to control & make them work."¹⁹² A South Carolinian whose lands had been caught up in the Port Royal experiment thought it "took 3 to do the labor of one before the war."¹⁹³ Another planter was hardly more generous in estimating that blacks accomplished only "two-fifths of what they did under the old system."¹⁹⁴ In June, 1867, a Tennessee man concluded that blacks were "a trifling set of lazy devils who will never make a living without Masters."¹⁹⁵

While they themselves retained their monopoly of land, planters were aware only of the freedmen's near monopoly of labor. "The darkies have the long end of the pole," a Virginian declared in June, 1867, "for we cant supply their places, that I know of."¹⁹⁶ And without the prerogatives of mastery, planters believed, they and the freedmen were not evenly matched. "The negro can never be made to work as when a slave," a bitter South Carolinian asserted in January, 1868, "and the wear and tear on those who have to follow them will in time kill many of our young men or drive them to other pursuits."¹⁹⁷ Many, in fact, promised never to drive another plow into the ground if they could sell their lands. In September, 1867, a Virginia aristocrat explained the mood in his neighborhood. "The Harrisons, Hobsons, Bollings, Galts, Cockes, Cabells, and others with whom I have associated—first rate James River farmers—owners of fine estates and of every thing upon them except their former slaves—are restless, despondent, almost despairing." To a man they agreed that their difficulties grew chiefly "out of the changed condition of labor." They were "barely making expenses" and what little they made came "at the expense of feeling, and almost of self-respect, very trying to them." Many were "endeavoring to sell their estates, others to lease. . . ." ¹⁹⁸

After two years, sentiment against free black labor was almost universal. Demurrers were heard occasionally, of course, but optimism was almost always a springtime flower. By summer, it had usually withered. The criticisms of free black labor were more than just expressions of employers' dissatisfaction with the performance of their labor force. Planters predicted not merely continued difficulty but often disaster. Abolition would "be the end of what has been the

most splendid [of] agricultural countries in the world," concluded a planter in Louisiana.¹⁹⁹ In Texas, another declared, "Cotton cannot be grown to any great & successful extent by free negro labor."²⁰⁰ In the judgment of a Chickasawhatchee, Mississippi, man, "Cotton has got its doom stamped upon it."²⁰¹ And "freedmen won't do to tie to" was the terse conclusion of a Virginian.²⁰² Almost any planter would have gladly paid more than the reward offered in the *Southern Cultivator* in 1868 by a gentleman who promised fifty dollars to anyone who would show him how to make a living with "free negro labor."²⁰³

Northerners were sending Southerners a different message about the value of a free-labor economy, of course, but how could planters accept the basic economic principles of the damned Yankee culture? Northern ideas seemed naïve and ignorant, or at the very least, irrelevant. A year after the war, a South Carolinian reported that the Northerner who headed the Freedmen's Bureau in Charleston was committed to "fair play for both sides," but he added that this attitude was precisely the difficulty. "The fairest minded of all these officials," he explained, "seemed not to be able [to] comprehend the difference between the 'nigger' freedman and the white northern laborer."²⁰⁴ Another planter visiting New York in 1866 on business wrote home that people there "think that the negroes will naturally—must inevitably—work with a better will, with more spirit & vim if they have a prospect of receiving wages, *paid to themselves*[,] than they would, could, or *did* under the former system." As a Southern planter, however, he was "just as positive that they do not & never will."²⁰⁵

Rather than eroding old prejudices, therefore, two years' experience with free labor reinforced planters' suspicions. In much the same way that the war had buttressed antebellum beliefs, the immediate postwar years continued to provide support for old assumptions. But in 1865, the basis for pessimism had still been largely theoretical. By 1867, planters believed they had seen the future fail with their own eyes. Howell Cobb, for one, moved from a position of skepticism to outright gloom. In June, 1865, he had reaffirmed his belief that slavery provided "the best system of labor that could be devised for the negro race," but he had also urged Southerners "to recognize that slavery had passed away." He understood that it would "tax the abilities of the best and wisest statesmen to provide a substitute for it,"

but he implored planters to accept the challenge.²⁰⁶ Only a year and a half later, Cobb was ready to admit defeat. "The truth is," he explained, "I am thoroughly disgusted with free negro labor, and am determined that the next year shall close my planting operations with them."²⁰⁷

By 1867, Southern planters were hardly closer, intellectually, to accepting free black labor than they had been in 1863, when they first encountered it in the Mississippi valley. Cotton was not being produced without slaves—not profitably, at least—and the future seemed to offer little relief. Rather than launch a quixotic campaign to reinstitute legal slavery, planters strove in practical ways to channel rural life back into the well-beaten paths of the plantation past. But without slavery, life was unalterably and fundamentally transformed. It is hardly surprising that a central theme in planters' early postwar lives was a sense of powerlessness. We do not need to accept the assertion of a South Carolina planter that emancipation had made "the planter a slave, far worse than his slaves use to be."²⁰⁸ But judged by their standards, standards established in an earlier regime, they were enfeebled. Perhaps a Virginian did articulate a widespread if unexpressed desire in 1867 when he said, "All those people who say they would not take back their slaves if they could are near of kin to Baron Munchausen. I am no kith & want mine."²⁰⁹