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978-0-521-17267-7 - Slavery in the Development of the Americas

Edited by David Eltis, Frank D. Lewis and Kenneth L. Sokoloff

Frontmatter

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Slavery in the Development of the Americas

Slavery in the Development of the Americas brings together new work from leading historians and economic historians of slavery. The essays cover various aspects of slavery and the role of slavery in the development of the southern United States, Brazil, Cuba, the French and Dutch Caribbean, and elsewhere in the Americas. Some essays explore the emergence of the slave system, and others provide important insights about the operation of specific slave economies. There are reviews of slave markets and prices and discussions of the efficiency and distributional aspects of slavery. As well, new perspectives are brought on the transition from slavery and subsequent adjustments. The volume contains the latest work of scholars, many of whom have been pioneers in the study of slavery in the Americas.

David Eltis is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of History at Emory University. He is author of *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000). He also co-edited *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1999) with David Richardson, Stephen Behrendt, and Herbert S. Klein.

Frank D. Lewis is Professor of Economics at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada. He has published in numerous journals, including work on the U.S. Civil War with Claudin Joldin. Much of his recent research (with Ann M. Carlos) has concerned Native American history.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Appreciation: Stanley L. Engerman and Slavery</i>	<i>page vii</i>
Introduction	I
PART I ESTABLISHING THE SYSTEM	
1. White Atlantic? The Choice for African Slave Labor in the Plantation Americas <i>Seymour Drescher</i>	3 I
2. The Dutch and the Slave Americas <i>Pieter C. Emmer</i>	70
PART II PATTERNS OF SLAVE USE	
3. Mercantile Strategies, Credit Networks, and Labor Supply in the Colonial Chesapeake in Trans-Atlantic Perspective <i>Lorena S. Walsb</i>	89
4. African Slavery in the Production of Subsistence Crops; the Case of São Paulo in the Nineteenth Century <i>Francisco Vidal Luna and Herbert S. Klein</i>	120
5. The Transition from Slavery to Freedom through Manumission: A Life-Cycle Approach Applied to the United States and Guadeloupe <i>Frank D. Lewis</i>	150
PART III PRODUCTIVITY CHANGE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS	
6. Prices of African Slaves Newly Arrived in the Americas, 1673–1865: New Evidence on Long-Run Trends and Regional Differentials <i>David Eltis and David Richardson</i>	181

Cambridge University Press

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Edited by David Eltis, Frank D. Lewis and Kenneth L. Sokoloff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

Contents

7. American Slave Markets During the 1850s: Slave Price Rises in the United States, Cuba, and Brazil in Comparative Perspective <i>Laird W. Bergad</i>	219
8. The Relative Efficiency of Free and Slave Agriculture in the Antebellum United States: A Stochastic Production Frontier Approach <i>Elizabeth B. Field-Hendrey and Lee A. Craig</i>	236
PART IV IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRIBUTION AND GROWTH	
9. Wealth Accumulation in Virginia in the Century before the Civil War <i>James R. Irwin</i>	261
10. The Poor: Slaves in Early America <i>Philip D. Morgan</i>	288
11. The North–South Wage Gap before and after the Civil War <i>Robert A. Margo</i>	324
<i>The Writings of Stanley L. Engerman</i>	353
<i>Contributors</i>	363
<i>Index</i>	365

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978-0-521-17267-7 - Slavery in the Development of the Americas

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Appreciation: Stanley L. Engerman and Slavery

A fundamental principle of the new economic history, when it emerged more than forty years ago, was Adam's Smith's idea that individual self-interest guides economic actions, promoting the efficient allocation of an economy's resources, as if by an invisible hand. Associated with this principle was the notion that no one person, innovation, or even industry could have more than limited impact on the development of an economy. Such a perspective not only separated the new from the old, but also helped erect a dividing wall between the disciplines of economics and history, a barrier that stands to this day. Most historians with an economics background reject singular events as important to the course of development, and this view guides much of their work. By contrast, perhaps nine out of ten historians without such a background think this approach nonsensical.

Rejecting uncausal explanations has ramifications for all of life's endeavors. Applied to the world of scholarship, one might ask what possible difference can a single scholar make to a field of intellectual inquiry, given the pools of talent and widely available resources? New knowledge and new interpretations should evolve with or without the individual with whom such findings are commonly associated. Yet, if the logical basis for the current collection of essays, *festschrifts* in general and, beyond that, all recognitions of any kind, including Nobel prizes is unclear, economists and economic historians, who pride themselves on their realistic view of the world, still honor outstanding scholars, much as do the practitioners of other disciplines. Such apparent inconsistencies are the stuff of humanity, reflections at the micro level of the efforts of individuals and communities to strike a balance between their conceptions of what is right (principle) and the way the world works (expediency).

Studies of the past do not always acknowledge that the worldview of historical agents on the one hand, and the way those agents behave on the other, will to some degree always be at odds. Historians of slavery, in particular, have often preferred to apply the standards of our own day

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

to the past, generating as a consequence easy moral judgments. For Stan Engerman, however, the nexus between the worldviews of historical actors and the economic outcomes is of central interest, as are the shifts in moral values over time. He has spent a good part of his career exploring societies that espoused freedom, yet practiced, and legally enshrined, extreme restraints on some individuals in the interests of improving the conditions of others. Cast more broadly, the study of slavery involves nothing less than the role of coercion in the development of the free labor and free enterprise societies of the modern world. And it includes Stan's focus on a capitalist system that came to reject slavery, which in the Americas was a profitable, viable, and highly flexible institution.

Stan has tracked the emergence of a modern labor force that responded to wage incentives, yet from the seventeenth century rejected the higher incomes associated with field labor on plantations, and continued to do so after slavery was abolished. The slave family life and culture that flourished in the Americas, in the face of masters' powers apparently greater than in any earlier slave society, have formed another of Stan's major preoccupations, as has the notion that demographic patterns were shaped more by environmental patterns shared across the slave-free divide than by the large gulf that separated slave and non-slave sectors. The recurring leitmotif of his work is the impossibility of any human action generating outcomes that are purely beneficial, or purely malevolent, even when those actions include the destruction and indeed the inception of slavery in the Americas. Class analysis and neo-classical economic theory both generate powerful insights into slavery, but understanding how a slave system could evolve and then disappear begins with realization of the complexity of the relationship between good and evil.

It is perhaps likely that the revolution in slave studies since the 1950s would have happened anyway, but no one has been closer to its epicenter, nor spent as much time there as Stan Engerman. His office at the Rochester Department of Economics (with its triple layer of books lining the walls) and home have functioned as a crossroads and clearinghouse for nearly four decades, not just for new ideas, but also of scholars – junior and senior, affiliated and unaffiliated, radical and conservative – seeking intellectual assistance and commentary. The finished output of those scholars has, as often as not, passed through this clearinghouse, first as a draft, second as a finished typescript, and third as a manuscript from a publisher (or journal editor) seeking advice on whether to publish. Each time through it has received informed and, above all, generous advice and, more specifically, a bundle of new references that its author had missed. Moreover, no one in the field (nor, we daresay, in either economics or history generally) has carried out more collaborative research. No one has more co-authors and co-editors. A few years ago at a plenary session of a large slave conference, Stan noted that he had been asked to co-edit the proceedings and asked his companion whether

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Appreciation*

ix

he should accept. “Why not,” was the reply, “there isn’t anyone else in the room with whom you haven’t published.”

Less well recognized is his role in finding and distributing primary materials. The revolution in slave studies was built, of course, on a widening interest in the subject on the part of both scholars and the general public, and on the micro-computer revolution and associated advances in quantitative work, but above all it was built on the exploitation of the remarkably rich primary materials that slave systems left behind. The real revolution in slave studies has been the quantum leap in what was available to know about slave systems in the Americas. No scholar has used a wider range of these materials in his own work than has Stan Engerman, and certainly no scholar has passed on so quickly to others both the documentary references and, where possible, what it was possible to cull from those documents. Thus, for example, anthropometric studies in slavery, indeed in history generally, began with an Engerman set of tables that appeared in *Population Studies* in 1976. All this activity has fueled a grasp of the core issues in so many different aspects of the field such that an outside reader for a multi-volume project that Stan was editing told the publisher, who had sought him out for an opinion, that not only was Stan Engerman a peerless editor, but also that if any of the contributors failed to come through with the commissioned essay on time, then the editor would easily be able to write it himself and deliver the manuscript on schedule.

The nature of the present volume is such that of all similar books published in the last two decades, this is the one that has passed through the Rochester clearinghouse the fewest number of times. After all, one could hardly ask a scholar to review his or her own festschrift. This leaves us with a particularly appropriate irony. To the extent that this collection falls short in any way, we regard such a shortfall in part as a testament to the quality of the scholar it is intended to honor.