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978-1-107-03121-0 - Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South

Damian Alan Pargas

Excerpt

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PART I

MIGRATION

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I

Valuable Bodies

A darkey's worth a hundred dollars as soon as he kin holler – dat's what de white folks say bout here.

Virginia slave to James Redpath, 1854¹

Recalling his life as a slave before the Civil War, William Henry Singleton closed his short autobiography (published in 1922) by expressing infinite gratitude to Abraham Lincoln for emancipating “me and all the rest of my race.” The former bondsman considered all of the privileges and responsibilities that came with freedom a blessing, but above all else he was clearly most grateful for the acknowledgment by the United States government of his humanity – in his words, for the right “not to be bought and sold any more . . . not to be treated as things without souls any more, but as human beings.” Having been deported from his North Carolina home to Georgia as a young boy, Singleton knew firsthand what it was like to be bought and sold like a “thing” without a soul. That his definition of freedom entailed first and foremost the right not to be traded like an inanimate object is hardly surprising – for millions of African Americans, the commodification of slave bodies symbolized the atrocities of antebellum slavery.²

Such dehumanization was, of course, nothing new in the nineteenth-century South: the selling of bondspeople domestically from one slaveholder to another

¹ James Redpath, *The Roving Editor; or, Talks with the Slaves in the Southern States* (1859; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 199.

² William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days* (n.p., 1922), 9 (first quote). Maryland slave James Pennington blamed the constant disruption of slaves' identities through forced removal in the antebellum period on “the chattel principle,” or the dehumanizing commodification of slave bodies. James W.C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith: Or Events in the Life of James W.C. Pennington* (London, 1849), iv–vii. This concept has been further explored by Walter Johnson in his seminal study of the antebellum slave market, *Soul by Soul*. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19–44.

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had existed in the colonial period, and the immediate and (potentially) permanent reallocation of individual slaves' labor across space underpinned the very institution of chattel slavery in the first place. What did set the antebellum period apart, however, was the sheer *magnitude* of domestic forced removal. The frequency with which enslaved people were relocated increased dramatically in the early nineteenth century, and by the outbreak of the Civil War, the scale of forced migration in the southern states had truly skyrocketed. For a variety of reasons, more American-born slaves from the so-called "migration generations" – those who lived between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War – found themselves uprooted and removed from their homes than ever before. Few African Americans emerged unscathed when emancipation finally came; those who had not been forcibly removed themselves usually had family members or friends who had been.³

Why were enslaved people forcibly relocated in the antebellum South? How was the forced migration of American slaves organized and executed? And to what extent were interstate migrants, local migrants, and urban migrants moved for different reasons or by different means? This first chapter broadly illuminates the various reasons for the reallocation of slave labor (in all of its forms) in the nineteenth-century South, with a particular emphasis on the supply and demand for slave labor. It then examines the formal and informal organization of different types of forced migration.

I.

The economic undercurrents that propelled domestic slave migration in the antebellum period varied by region and especially type of migration. For most students and scholars of American slavery, the forced relocation of enslaved people in the nineteenth century is virtually synonymous with interstate migration: a one-way trajectory from east to west and from north to south. This is partly because of the stark contrast that interregional migration in that era posed with domestic migration in earlier periods. In the colonial period, slavery had mostly been confined to the eastern seaboard – especially the tobacco lands of the Chesapeake and the rice swamps of the lowcountry – and domestic slave trading had consisted mainly of local transactions. In antebellum America, however, the increasingly national market for slaves stimulated, as economic historian Lewis Cecil Gray once put it, a massive "shift of slave population from the older planting regions – particularly the border states – to the newer planting regions in the lower South." This "shift of population" both characterized and defined the explosive expansion of slavery in the nineteenth century

³ Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 161–244.

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and has therefore understandably received the most attention from scholars of American slave migration.⁴

The numbers alone are staggering. The most recent estimates suggest that between 1820 and 1860, at least 875,000 slaves were forcibly removed from the Upper South and sent to the Lower South – if starting from the end of the Revolutionary War estimates run as high as one million, or *double* the number of African slaves sent to North America in the years of the Atlantic slave trade. The Upper South was indeed drained of so many bondspeople in the nineteenth century that by the time the Civil War broke out, its slave population was only 60 percent of what it would have been if it had grown naturally. On the receiving end of this unprecedented wave of forced migration, the Lower South consistently experienced periods of unnaturally high growth rates among its slave population as drove after drove of enslaved newcomers permeated its borders. In the banner decade of the 1830s, for example, when interstate migration reached its peak, the slave population of the up-and-coming states of Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana increased by an impressive 68 percent; that of Alabama alone more than doubled; and Mississippi's number of slaves almost tripled. In the same period, the slave population of Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, and the Carolinas not only failed to grow at all, but the number of slaves forcibly removed from these states as a whole was so great that the population there actually *decreased* in absolute terms by 2 percent.⁵

A number of factors were responsible for the “mighty torrent” that, in the words of Ira Berlin, “washed thousands of black men and women across the continent” in the half century preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. Most important, as the United States expanded west of the Atlantic tidewater after the Revolutionary War, the successful development of slave-based cotton, sugar, and tobacco economies in the newly settled territories, combined with

⁴ Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern States to 1860* (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1933), 2:650 (quote). For the most well-known studies of interstate slave migration, see, for example, Frederic Bancroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South* (1931; reprint Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, ch. 4; Johnson, *Soul By Soul*; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*; David L. Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power: How the Struggle Against the Interstate Slave Trade Led to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

⁵ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 41–46, 283–89; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 161; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989), 63; Peter McClelland and Richard Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions of the New Republic: American Interregional Migration, Vital Statistics, and Manumissions, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 118–19, 135; Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power*, 5–8.

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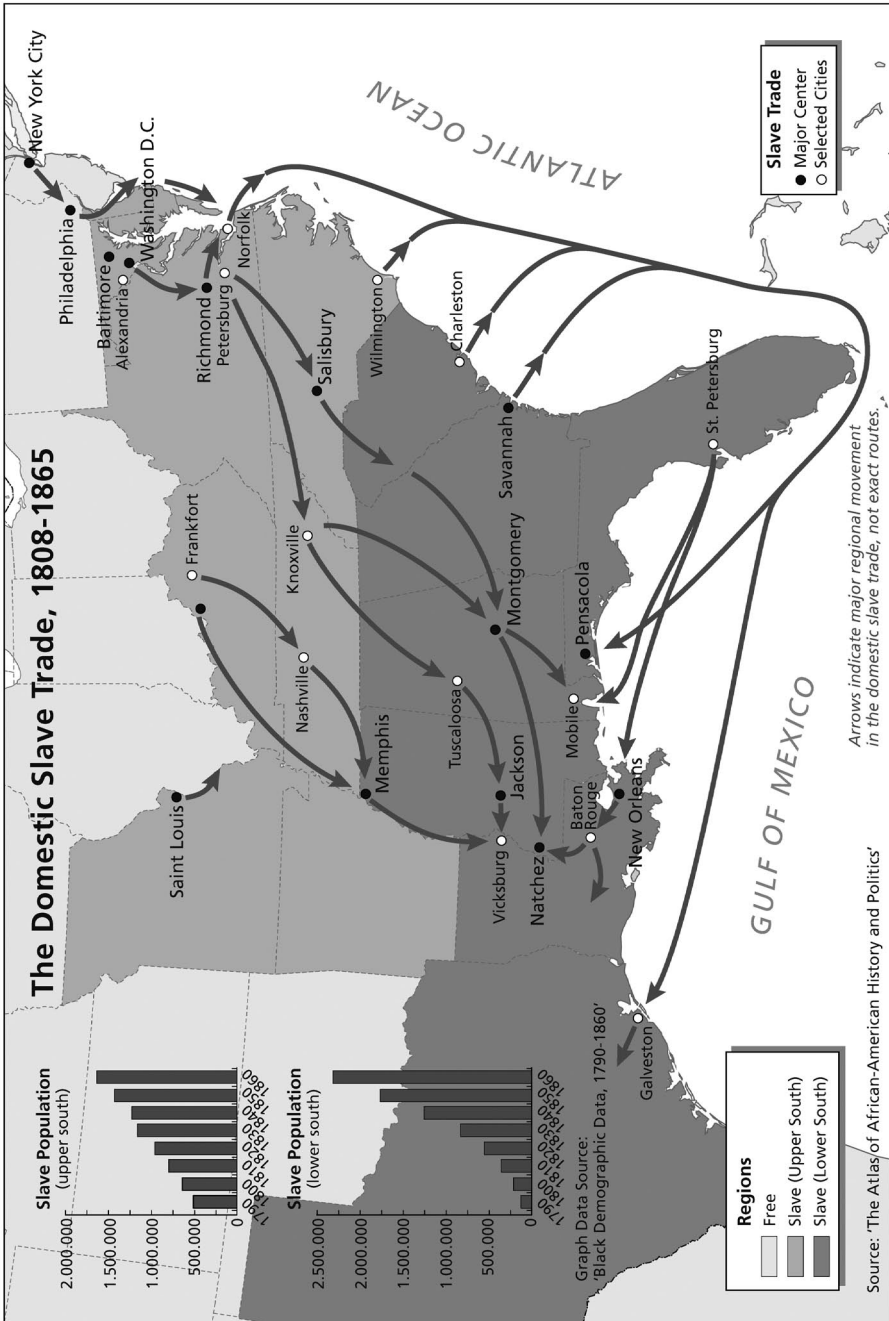


FIGURE I.1. "Map of the domestic slave trade, 1808-1865." Graphic design: Armand Haye.

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the decline of slave-based agriculture in parts of the Upper South, pulled slaves from the eastern seaboard to the southern interior like a giant magnet.⁶

More than anything else, the rise of cotton revitalized the institution of slavery in the new republic and stimulated a massive reallocation of slave labor to the Lower South. As early as the late eighteenth century, there arose an explosive demand for American cotton in Great Britain, a demand that could never fully be met by the geographically limited production of long-staple (“sea-island”) cotton that was cultivated as a secondary crop in the rice lands of the South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry. American planters along the eastern seaboard were keenly aware of the potentially lucrative production of the short-staple variety, but experience had shown this to be ultimately too expensive because of the difficulties in separating its seeds. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and subsequent improvements thereof, however, solved this problem, increasing productivity exponentially and paving the way for the “cotton fever” that gripped the American South in the antebellum period.⁷

The interstate movement of American slaves both followed and fueled the geographic expansion of cotton. Due to climatic conditions, the short-staple variety was best cultivated in the vast and as yet sparsely settled lands of the interior rather than the coastal plains where most planters and slaves lived at the time of the Revolution. Gradually moving inland, the piedmont regions of South Carolina and Georgia were the first to be cleared and converted to cotton at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the westward expansion quickly spilled into the new territories of the Deep South. To contemporaries, opportunities to convert new frontiers into profitable cotton plantations seemed limitless because the land itself seemed limitless. The close of the Revolutionary War had resulted in the acquisition of most of the lands east of the Mississippi, and the subsequent purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 increased the territory in which cotton could potentially be cultivated by millions of acres. Following their new cash crop into the beckoning “cotton kingdom,” settlers from the eastern seaboard – both solitary prospectors and entire slaveholding families – rushed to establish themselves in a broad belt of upcountry that ultimately stretched from the South Carolina piedmont through Texas. “My object is to make a fortune here as soon as possible,” wrote one planter emigrant to Alabama back home to his brother in Virginia in 1835. Southern cotton production soared (from 178,000 bales in 1810 to more than four million in 1860), becoming the nation’s primary export product, generating unfathomable wealth, and sustaining an almost insatiable demand for slave labor

⁶ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 163 (quote); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁷ Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, 64–65; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), 94–95; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 20–22; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2:678–95; Joyce E. Chaplin, “Creating a Cotton South in Georgia and South Carolina, 1760–1815,” *Journal of Southern History* 57 (May 1991): 171–200.

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in the states of the Deep South. As early as the 1820s, visitors to Mississippi reported that local cotton planters were netting “from ten to forty thousand dollars a year,” most of which they reinvested in more land and more slaves, paying truly exorbitant prices for the latter. In 1835, one Natchez resident exclaimed in a letter to his father-in-law in Maryland that “Negroes are selling here at \$1000 for women and \$1500 for men!” By the late antebellum period, southerners had become so obsessed with “niggers and cotton – cotton and niggers” that they spoke of little else, according to traveler James Stirling, who visited the region in 1857. The resulting geographic shift of the American slave population into the cotton regions fundamentally altered the southern allocation of slave labor: whereas at the beginning of the nineteenth century only 11 percent of American slaves lived on cotton plantations, by 1860 some 64 percent did. The Mississippi Valley, rather than the eastern seaboard, became the new center of gravity for American slavery.⁸

Paralleling the expansion of the cotton industry in the Lower South, the sugar revolution in southern Louisiana simultaneously increased demand for American slave labor in the Lower Mississippi Valley even further. This development came as something of a surprise because the region’s unpredictable climate frustrated initial attempts in the eighteenth century to cultivate sugarcane on a commercial scale, resulting in an inferior product that failed to granulate properly and therefore could not compete with West-Indian production. The lack of a lucrative cash crop kept Louisiana’s slave population relatively small during most of the eighteenth century, but that changed in the 1790s. The slave revolt on Saint-Domingue in 1791 reduced North America’s sugar supply, raised its price, and sent hundreds of skilled sugar makers fleeing to Louisiana, leading to renewed and ultimately successful efforts to establish a commercial cane industry along the Mississippi River. New cultivation methods, granulation techniques, and technological advances around the turn of the nineteenth century further increased productivity and improved the quality of Louisiana sugar. The final victory for North American proponents of cane production, however, came with the acquisition of Louisiana by the United States in 1803 and its subsequent admission as a state in 1812, which provided

⁸ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 5–6; Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, 30, 64–65; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 94–96; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 20–21; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2:678–95; Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (New York: De Capo Press, 1968), 296 (first quote); Henry A. Tayloe to B.O. Tayloe, Jan. 5, 1835, Tayloe Family Papers, RASP, Series E., Part 1 (microfilm), JFK Institute, Freie Universität, Berlin (second quote); John Knight to Wm. M. Beall, Sept. 10, 1835, John Knight Papers, RASP, Series F, Part 1 (microfilm), JFK Institute, Freie Universität, Berlin (third quote); James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (1857; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 179 (fourth quote); Anthony Gene Carey, *Sold Down the River: Slavery in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Alabama and Georgia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 14–70; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 37–72. See also Daniel S. Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800–1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

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planters with a lucrative domestic market and attractive tariff protection from West-Indian competition. Both established Creole farmers and profit-seeking “American” migrants in southern Louisiana (many of whom were slaveholders from the eastern states) needed no other incentives to take up cane cultivation. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, southerners were declaring in awe that “those who have attempted the cultivation of Sugar Cane are making immense fortunes.” Estwick Evans, who visited the sugar country in 1818, reported that “immense profits” of “20,000 to 30,000 dollars” had become almost standard on southern Louisiana cane plantations.⁹

Although the cotton boom was by far the most important pull factor in the reallocation of American slave labor from the eastern seaboard to the southern interior, the expansion of Louisiana’s enormously profitable sugar plantations disproportionately increased the number of displacements, as the sugar masters did absolutely everything in their power to supply their plantations with an adequate slave labor force. In 1805, an act passed by Congress that banned the importation of slaves into Louisiana who had been brought from Africa after 1798 was conveniently interpreted by local authorities to permit the importation of slaves from any other part of the United States (including those born in Africa), opening the floodgates to a flourishing slave trade that continued on a large scale until the Civil War. Indeed, New Orleans became the South’s busiest slave market. Ever dependent on importation from other states, the slave population in the sugar parishes – which uniquely failed to grow naturally – mushroomed from less than 10,000 in 1810 to more than 88,000 in 1860.¹⁰

The cotton and sugar regions received a majority of interstate slave migrants in the antebellum period – the four largest importers, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas alone received more than 75 percent. A minority of long-distance slave migrants, however, were transferred to the frontier states that lay just north of the “cotton kingdom,” states such as Kentucky, (most of)

⁹ J. Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753–1950* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1953), 1–14; Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana’s Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 10–11, 17–18; John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 10–11; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 73–118; René J. Le Gardeur, Jr, “The Origins of the Sugar Industry,” in *Green Fields: Two Hundred Years of Louisiana Sugar*, compiled by the Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana (Lafayette, La.: The Center, 1980), 4–22; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2:739–40; V. Alton Moody, *Slavery on Louisiana Sugar Plantations* (New Orleans: Cabildo, 1924), 8–10; J.A. Leon, *On Sugar Cultivation; in Louisiana, Cuba, & the British Possessions* (London, 1848), 10; T.B. Thorpe, “Sugar and the Sugar Region of Louisiana,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 42 (Nov. 1853): 747–48; *Louisiana Gazette*, Aug. 8, 1806 (first quote); Estwick Evans, *A Pedestrian Tour of Four Thousand Miles Through the Western States and Territories during the Winter and Spring of 1818* (Concord, NH: Joseph C. Spear, 1818), 326 (second quote).

¹⁰ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 179; Sitterson, *Sugar Country*, 10; Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 11; Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, 30; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2.

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Tennessee, and Missouri. Kentucky's slave population grew from just more than 40,000 in 1800 to more than 225,000 in 1860; Tennessee's mushroomed from 13,500 in 1800 to almost 276,000 on the eve of the Civil War; and Missouri's grew from only 3,000 in 1810 to almost 115,000 in 1860. Indeed, many early slave migrants from Virginia and Maryland accompanied their masters to these territories and states in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, often in search of better opportunities to cultivate and manufacture tobacco. As Missouri historian Diane Mutti Burke has argued, white Upper South migrants were first and foremost "enticed westward by the promise of reasonably priced fertile land in the bottomlands of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and their tributaries," but they were also attracted by the possibility of replicating "a farming and slaveholding experience much like the one that they left in the East." Slaves living in states such as Virginia and Maryland were therefore constantly confronted with the prospect of moving west into the expanding frontier.¹¹

To some extent, the large-scale westward movement to the border states was a chain migration, with slaveholding families and neighbors from specific counties following each other into the territories of the new frontier. Between 1810 and 1830, for example, several leading slaveholding families from struggling Fairfax County, Virginia, departed for Kentucky, and a number of them pressed on and ended up in Callaway County, Missouri. Henry Clay Bruce, a former slave from Virginia, claimed that his master moved west because his brother-in-law was going west. According to Bruce, his owner "became greatly dissatisfied with his home and surroundings . . . and being persuaded by his brother-in-law, W.B. Bruce, who was preparing to go to the western country, as Missouri and Kentucky were called, he decided to break up his Virginia home, and take his slaves to Missouri, in company with Mr. W.B. Bruce." By the 1830s and 1840s, settlers in Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee were also importing slaves from the eastern seaboard, albeit in lower numbers than their counterparts in the cotton and sugar regions.¹²

The rise in demand for slave labor in the ever expanding plantation South during the early decades of the nineteenth century coincided with the

¹¹ Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, 65; McClelland and Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions*, 118–19; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 96–97; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2:754–59; Gudmestad, *Troublesome Commerce*, 8–9; Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 32–52; Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815–1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 26–29, 27 (first quote); William Greenleaf Eliot, *The Story of Archer Alexander: From Slavery to Freedom* (Boston: Cupples, Upham, & Co., 1885), 27; Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America* (London: Wertheim, MacIntosh, and Hunt, 1863), 14.

¹² Nan Netherton, et al, *Fairfax County, Virginia: A History* (Fairfax, Va.: Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, 1978), 156; Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty-Nine Years a Slave, Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man* (York, Pa.: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1895), 15 (quote).