FROM LORDS TO LANDLORDS

by James L. Roark

By April 1865, the Southern planters' dreams of perpetuating slavery in an independent republic had vanished. Secession had cost the South a quarter of a million men dead and nearly $3 billion in slave property when three and a half million black laborers were freed. As some Southern anti-Secessionists had prophesied, the Civil War ended in the destruction of the "peculiar institution" it was intended to make secure.

Before Appomattox, the planters had identified the South's entire society and culture with slavery. When they came home from the war, economic survival required that they grapple with emancipation at its most immediate and practical level—as the loss of their labor system. If we assume that ownership of 20 or more slaves constituted membership in the "planter class," then some 43,000 previously well-to-do Southern white families, heavily dependent on slavery and the plantation system, were threatened in 1865 with economic extinction.

Before the war, slavery had led to the rapid concentration of land and wealth. The Southern countryside was dominated economically by great slave plantations. Plantation staples—cotton, sugar, rice, tobacco, and hemp—were produced for the market rather than for home consumption. Cotton was clearly king. In 1860, cotton employed more than three-fourths of all the slaves engaged in agriculture. The crop that year reached nearly 4 million bales (valued at $250 million), two-thirds of which were exported, making up the major portion of the world's supply.

During and after Reconstruction, the primary goal of the planters was the economic recovery of plantation agriculture, with some new form of black labor. The problem for the planters was not just economic. The war-stricken South's transformation from a slave economy to a free labor economy represented a

psychologically shattering loss of power for the planter—a shift from being lord to being landlord. Although planters' daily lives continued to revolve around cotton culture, black labor, and the plantation, they knew they had passed "from that Old World to this New One, through the war-Storm."[1]

The first summer of peace found most members of the planter class back on their plantations, face to face with what one of them called the "emancipation trials." A few planters had emigrated—some to Northern cities and the rich farmlands of the West, others to Europe and Latin America (from whence most returned within a few years)—but a majority stayed, not because they wanted to but because they felt they had no alternative. "I am obliged to try," wrote Georgia planter John Dobbins to a friend in January 1866, as he returned to his cotton fields, "for I have no other way to make money."[2]

A willingness to return to the fields did not mean that they had changed their view of society. Where attitudes toward slavery and blacks, Southern agriculture, and Southern civilization were concerned, the planters ended the war much as they had begun it.

Reinventing Slavery

"Nothing could overcome this rooted idea," a visiting Northern journalist, Whitelaw Reid, noted in the summer of 1865, "that the negro was worthless, except under the lash."[3] Slavery may have been destroyed, but planters remained convinced that blacks were innately and immutably inferior, that without total subordination they were dangerous and destructive, and that without coercion they would not work.

Without slavery, the Charleston *Mercury* had asserted in January 1865, the South would become a "most magnificent jungle." Emancipation would mean that "our great productions, cotton, rice, and sugar . . . must quickly be swept away." It was "absurd to suppose that the African will work under a system of voluntary labor . . . the labor of the negro must be compulsory—he must be a slave."[4]

Emancipation, therefore, confronted planters with a problem their deepest convictions told them was impossible to resolve—the management of large plantations employing free black labor. But even as they equated successful plantations with slavery, the gentry could not acquiesce in the final decline of their holdings just because the old labor system was gone. Preservation of their estates had dictated the planters' behavior for generations, and most were resilient enough in 1865 to make

yet another effort.*

What planters believed they needed to ensure satisfactory black performance was a comprehensive labor law shaped to fit their needs. Consequently, in late 1865, several Southern states began devising a new labor system under so-called Black Codes. Officially, the aim of the codes was to "guard [blacks] and the States against any evils that may arise from their sudden emancipation." But the immediate effect was to channel blacks back to the plantations, and once there, to coerce them into working.

The codes differed from state to state, but they clearly defined a new system of involuntary servitude. In some cases, the codes made it illegal for blacks to own land or to work except as field labor and in domestic service. Loosely drawn vagrancy statutes made it possible for police to round up unemployed blacks in time of labor shortages. Planters would then post bond, bail the blacks out of jail, and "allow" them to work off their debts at wage rates of a few pennies per day.

Radical Republican Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts saw the codes as a blatant attempt at "semi-peonage."[5] The planters thought they were absolutely necessary, for in the behavior of blacks lay the key to the future of the South.

Resurrection of the old plantation system required the continuation of white supervision, work gangs, task systems, clustered cabins, and minimal personal freedom. But members of the planter class were no longer able to organize and operate plantations as they wished. Congress, through the Fourteenth Amendment, legally disallowed the Black Codes by forbidding the states to pass discriminatory legislation against the rights of any citizens, even as the Army and the Freedmen's Bureau rendered null the harsh provisions of some codes by not permitting them to be carried out.

*Emancipation caused some planters to overcome their traditional fear of foreign immigrants, and there were organized efforts to attract white immigrant labor to the South. Few chose to come and these few did not relish plantation work. In 1866, John Floyd King brought about 100 German immigrants from New York City to work on plantations along the Mississippi River. Within weeks, 35 had fled.

James L. Roark, 36, is associate professor of history at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Born in Eunice, La., he received his B.A. (1963) and M.A. (1964) from the University of California, Davis, and his Ph.D. from Stanford (1973). He has taught in Nigeria and Kenya and has been a member of the University of Missouri faculty since 1971. He is the author of Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction *(1977) and is currently at work on a three-generation biography of the Wade Hampton family of South Carolina.*

Before everything else, the freed slave wanted land of his own as a material base with which to support his legal freedom. Although lacking well-developed political power, blacks were determined to remove all vestiges of slavery, and they expected the federal government to supply them with the means. If they could not share the land in 1865, they wanted at least to share in decisions about how they would farm the land. They wanted the right to decide whether or not to work their children in the fields. They wanted to be rid of gang labor which, under slavery, had meant dawn-to-dusk plowing or hoeing on assigned amounts of acreage under constant white supervision.

Wholesome Compulsion

Like the planters, however, the federal government was eager to keep freedmen working on plantations. There, the blacks would be fed, clothed, productively employed, and off the federal relief rolls. General Oliver Otis Howard, commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, cheerily remarked apropos of labor contracts for blacks that "wholesome compulsion eventuated in larger independence."[6] Building upon a contract labor system developed during the war in some areas occupied by Union forces (parts of Virginia and the Carolinas, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Valley), the Freedmen's Bureau launched a campaign to bind ex-slaves and ex-masters by legal contracts.

Planters entered into these contracts in 1865 with little confidence that the agreements would solve their labor problems. But in reality, the contracts were largely favorable to the planters, and Bureau agents saw to it that blacks signed and fulfilled contracts to work on plantations. Federal encouragement took many forms—patient explanations, tirades, whippings, even hanging by the thumbs. The recalcitrant were sometimes made to work on government road gangs or threatened with denial of government food rations.

But Federal troops, and more importantly, the new Freedmen's Bureau, stood guard against re-enslavement. The Bureau was ready to protect freedmen from the planter's whip and it sought to make sure that the planters also lived up to the contracts; planters were ordered to provide whatever food, clothing, shelter, medical care, if any, was called for in the contract, as well as to pay the stipulated cash wages or shares of the crop.

The minority of planters that could put the psychology of the master-slave relationship behind them soon recognized that Bureau enforcement of contracts meant the restoration of planter control, perhaps even plantation prosperity. During the

early years of Reconstruction, however, a majority of planters regarded the contracts as humiliating symbols of their lost power and of the transformation of blacks from slaves to freedmen. Instead of treating the black as chattel, the planter now was compelled to sign a contract with him as an equal.

Frustrated Hopes

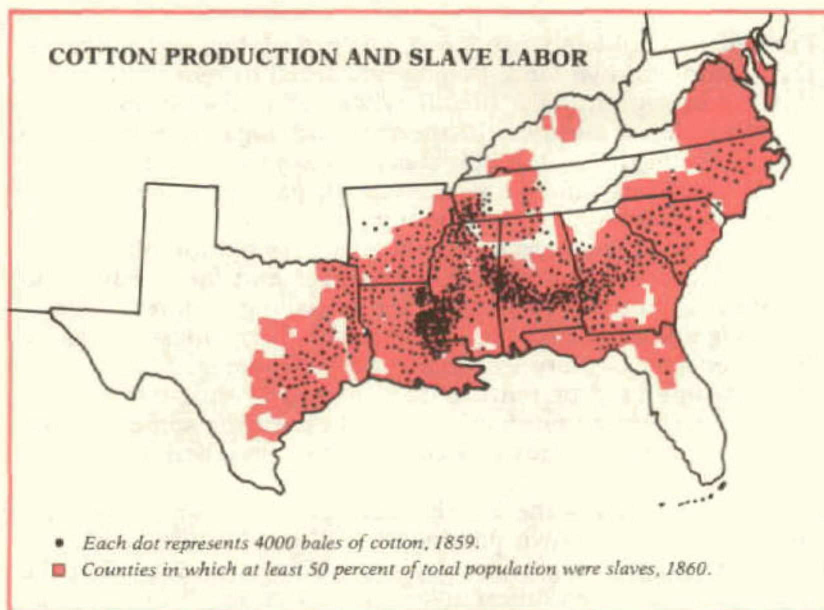
Nor were the freedmen satisfied. Although a series of Reconstruction measures was eventually enacted by Congress, the new laws fell short of buttressing the freedom of ex-slaves with the economic security of land ownership. During the War, Northerners had struck a blow at property rights—the rights of slaveholders to their slave property. But during Reconstruction, despite the pleas of some Northern radical Republicans for a revolution in Southern landholding, Congress refused to strike a second blow by permanently confiscating plantations and redistributing land to freedmen. Congress had decided to maintain the system of large landholdings in the South rather than replace it with a system of small yeoman farms.

Why? The Republican-controlled Congresses of the immediate postwar years were not primarily worried about the well-being of Southern aristocrats. They were more concerned with upholding property rights. They were determined to restore the Union and feared that expropriation of white-owned land in the South would be highly divisive and a permanent obstacle to binding up the nation's wounds. They feared social and racial turmoil in the South and were anxious to restore agricultural production, particularly of cotton, which made up 60 percent of American exports in 1860.

In short, the victorious Northerners blocked the conflicting plans and hopes of both white and black Southerners for agricultural reorganization. There was to be neither pseudo-slavery under the Black Codes nor the black man's hope of "40 acres and a mule." Northern policy demanded adjustments from both former masters and former slaves, but it did no more than sketch the broadest outlines of the economic system that would replace slavery.

Thus, the South's new economic system was developed not in Washington but on the plantations. Battle lines were formed in thousands of separate plantations. On one side stood an army of formerly enslaved agricultural workers, on the other a smaller but more powerful force of landlords. Landowners without laborers confronted laborers without land.

"All the traditions and habits of both races had been sud-



Adapted from *Historical Atlas of the United States* (Holt, 1944) and *Historical Geography of the United States* (Greenwood, 1932).

The population of the South in 1860 totaled 10,800,000, of which almost 4 million were slaves heavily concentrated in a rich cotton belt that produced more than 5 million bales in 1859.

denly overthrown," Joseph B. Killebrew, a Tennessee planter recalled, "and neither knew just what to do, or how to accommodate themselves to the new situation."[7] Even so, planters and freedmen set about experimenting with new arrangements, moving ahead by trial and error, hoping to find a system that worked. Planters were determined to keep their plantations from breaking up, and almost no one would sell land to blacks. Many whites even refused to rent, arguing that renting to Negroes was "very injurious to the best interests of the community."[8]

During the first two years after the war, many planters were successful in retaining slave-style gang labor, paying blacks either wages or shares of the crop. Some landowners adopted the practice of paying shares because they were short of cash with which to pay wages and because they hoped that workers with an interest in the outcome of the crop would be a steadier, more industrious labor force.

Although the share system was widespread, 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 land, then they wanted to sharecrop.*

Wage labor survived in the rice and sugar regions of the South, but in the cotton belt sharecropping gradually came to dominate. Black families worked small patches of land owned by whites, and landlord and laborers divided the crop at the end of the season. Sharecropping made it possible for planters to obtain labor without paying cash wages and for freedmen to obtain land to till without buying it or paying cash rent. Sharecropping was a compromise, satisfying neither whites nor blacks. It offered blacks more freedom than the labor gangs, but less than owning land or renting it; it offered white landowners a means of resuming production and of exercising some supervision of black labor, but less control than they believed necessary.

For a few years the South's agricultural arrangements resembled its well-known patchwork quilts. "On twenty plantations around me," an Arkansas planter observed a year after the war, "there were ten different styles of contracts."[9] But in time, a degree of uniformity appeared in the cotton South. Thus, sharecropping, originally intended as simply a temporary expedient, a makeshift arrangement spawned by a lack of cash and credit and the breakdown of the labor system, was fastened on the region. Once established, it varied little until well into the 20th century.

Seedy Remnants

Under the sharecropping system, cotton production revived, attaining prewar levels in the late 1870s. In time, whites accepted the fact that slavery was not indispensable after all for growing cotton. Planters did not necessarily praise the new labor arrangements, however. Virginian George W. Munford complained in 1870 that "the sharing system is a shearing system."[10] In this instance it was the planter who felt "sheared." Remembering their former wealth, power, and status, the Southern planter aristocracy found that sharecropping in times of falling cotton prices meant economic decline for most, disaster for some.

William Alexander Percy, born in Mississippi in 1885, described the post-Reconstruction generation: "There was no em-

*Working for shares and sharecropping were not the same. The former allowed for gang labor and plantation discipline. The latter meant independent family labor on rented farms, the rent being paid by a specified share of the crop going to the landlord.

battled aristocracy, for the descendants of the old-timers were already a rather seedy remnant, and there was no wealth. White folks and colored folks—that's what we were—and some of us were nice and some weren't."[11]

War and the Boll Weevil

In many ways, however, the South remained what it was when the Civil War began, a region with a highly inequitable distribution of land. Plantations not only survived, but, as a 1910 census revealed, actually increased in size and remained the most important units of agricultural production in the South.

Small farmers throughout the United States were finding it increasingly difficult to hold onto their lands (for example, there was a 35 percent rate of tenancy in the Midwest by 1900), but the small Southern landowner faced the added problems of wartime destruction: postwar tax laws that represented a shift from personal property taxes to land taxation, and a slide in land values that meant a loss of collateral with which to secure credit. On top of these came problems caused by poor growing conditions in 1866 and 1867, a decline in cotton prices, and, in the late 19th century, the ravages of the boll weevil.

Without being given land and without cash wages, blacks found it difficult to become landowners in the first place. In 1910, only about 20 percent of black agricultural workers in the South owned the land they farmed. But the problems faced by all small farmers meant that by the 1930s two out of every three tenant farmers in the South were white.

Yet, the survival of the large plantation did not necessarily mean the survival of the ante-bellum planters. The transfer of land titles by court order, mortgage foreclosures, and the sale of plantations after the war left many properties intact but dispossessed their ante-bellum owners. How many is impossible to say. A recent study of five black-belt counties in Alabama reveals that only 43 percent of the elite planters who were there in 1860 remained in 1870.[12] An enormous though still unquantified number of plantations changed hands in the decades after the war.

James Gregorie, for example, was a cotton planter in coastal South Carolina who found himself in desperate circumstances in 1867. He sought and found operating capital from Charles Rose, a New York financier. Rose loaned him $15,000 that year, and Gregorie resumed planting. His next crop was a complete failure. Unable to pay even the interest on the loan, he appealed

THE SOUTH'S POSTWAR DEPRESSION

Because local banks were either unable or unwilling to extend credit, crucial financial functions devolved upon country merchants, thousands of whom arose in the rural South to supply provisions to millions of black and white tenants in exchange for a lien on their share of the cotton crop. Exercising a monopoly in their local areas, they were able to demand that their customers grow only cotton, an easily marketed commodity. When it came time to settle up at the end of the season, the tenant was likely to find that he had fallen even further into debt. Tenants were more severely injured, but planters, judged by their income, the value of their lands, and the productivity of their farms, also found the new economic system permanently damaging.

Poverty became the South's most distinguishing characteristic. Its monopolistic credit system prevented economic diversification, and in 1900 the South's share of the nation's manufacturing output was smaller than it had been in 1860. Its inefficient system of agricultural production (and the unwillingness of freedmen to work like slaves) meant that in 1900 its agricultural output per member of the rural population was only three-quarters of that achieved under slavery. Its reliance on a single agricultural crop, at the moment when the world price for cotton was declining precipitously, meant that the South's per capita income at the turn of the century was only about half that of the North—less than it had been on the eve of the war.

for more money. Again Rose responded.

For six seasons, Gregorie met disaster and six times the New Yorker bailed him out. Each year—just as a rich crop of sea-island cotton was about to ripen—rain, drought, or caterpillars destroyed it. In 1873, after thousands of dollars had been invested and not a penny returned, Rose foreclosed and Gregorie lost his plantation.

Lands such as Gregorie's were often acquired by the rising merchant and industrial class of Southern cities, by banks, by rural merchants, and by wealthy Northerners who would continue planting with the services of a resident manager or perhaps let the land go back to bush and use it as a hunting preserve, the fate of many rice plantations along the Carolina coast.

Few of those prewar planters who managed to hold on were able to restore their plantations' prosperity or former organizational structure. By 1880, the internal fragmentation of the cot-

ton plantation into an assemblage of small tenant farms was almost complete. Measured either by the size of the cultivated unit or by the persistence of gang labor, fewer than 1 percent of all farms in the cotton belt bore any resemblance to ante-bellum plantations.[13]

The arrangements eventually made between landlords and laborers on Southern plantations were more than mere parochial agreements made in an economic context. Collectively, they provided the answer to the question that was at the heart of Reconstruction—the place of blacks in Southern society. In March 1864, during debate on a land-reform bill (which, if it had passed, would have confiscated the lands of disloyal planters and redistributed them in 40-acre plots), Republican Congressman George W. Julian of Indiana asked, "Of what avail would be an act of Congress totally abolishing slavery, or an amendment of the Constitution forever prohibiting it if the old agricultural basis of aristocratic power shall remain?"[14]

No Happy Ending

Throughout the Reconstruction period and afterward, planters and plantations continued to dominate the rural landscape in the South. In place of the master-slave relationship, white Southerners developed sharecropping and liens, segregation and militant white supremacy. Whites regained control of state government, and blacks remained at the bottom of the economic and social ladder.

As the major landholders in an agricultural society, planters continued to wield considerable power, but slavery had perished, and with it much that had characterized the antebellum South. Accustomed as they were to mastery, planters felt crippled and frustrated. Plantations were reorganized, but prosperity remained elusive. Plantations survived, but plantation life was transformed. Enmeshed in an unyielding economic network, planters saw their prized independence slipping away. In the end, white Southerners of all classes joined hands to end Republican rule in the South, but the planter class was unable to regain unquestioned political dominance or halt the economic deterioration of Southern agriculture.

1. Sidney Lanier, *Poems and Letters*, ed. by Charles R. Anderson, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969, p. 100.

2. John Dobbins to Elisha Laurey, Jan. 29, 1866, John S. Dobbins Papers, Emory University Library.

3. Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of the Southern States, 1865–1866*, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 34.

4. Quoted in Robert F. Durden, *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate* on *Emancipation,* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972, pp. 233–34.

5. Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South,* University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1965, passim.

6. William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen,* New York: Norton, 1968, p. 149.

7. Joseph Bucknew Killebrew, Autobiography, I, p. 213, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

8. Mrs. Mary Jones to Mrs. Mary S. Mallard, Nov. 17, 1865, in Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, p. 1308.

9. Quoted in J. T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battle Fields and Ruined Cities,* Hartford: L. Stebbins, 1866, p. 391.

10. George W. Munford to Thomas T. Munford, Dec. 4, 1870, Munford-Ellis Family Papers, Duke University Library.

11. William A. Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son,* New York: Knopf, 1945, p. 231.

12. Jonathan Wiener, "Planter Persistence and Social Change: Alabama, 1850–1870," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* Autumn 1976, pp. 235–60.

13. Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, "The Impact of the Civil War and of Emancipation on Southern Agriculture," *Explorations in Economic History,* no. 12, 1975, pp. 1–25.

14. *Congressional Globe,* 38th Congress, 1st Session, 1864, p. 1187.