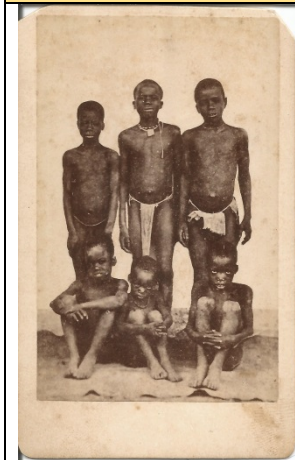


## Chapter 122 -- The Experience Of Those Enslaved In 1840



**Dates:**  
1840

**Sections:**

- The Black Population
- The South's Four Great Cash Crops
- The Practice Of Breeding Slaves
- Testimonials Of Slaves And Masters About "Breeding"
- The Increase In Slave Pregnancies
- Shipment Of Slaves To The West

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Date: 1840

### The Black Population



A Family Huddled In Front Of A Slave Cabin

The black population in 1840 has grown to 2.87 million people in total, with 87% still enslaved, all living in the South.

#### Black Population (000)

	<b>1820</b>	<b>1840</b>	<b>% Chg</b>
Total	1,771	2,873	+62
% Free	9%	13%	

While slave owners are overwhelmingly white men and women, a small number are free blacks. In South Carolina, for example, data from 1840 show 402 free blacks owning 2,002 slaves, or an average of five per family. The highest ownership among free blacks traces to three sugar plantations in Louisiana, with 215 slaves belonging to Nicholas Metoyer and his family, 152 to a widow, Ciprien Richards and her son, and another 70 to Antoine Dubuclet and his wife, Claire.

About 30% of all white families across the early southern states own slaves – with the incidence ranging from a high of 70% in Georgia to a low of 18% in Maryland.

	<b>%Total</b>
“Old South”	30%
Maryland/DC	18
Virginia	33
North Carolina	27
South Carolina	48
Georgia	70
Kentucky	29
Tennessee	26

US Census

If one starts with the white population of the entire South in 1840 (4.8 million), and assumes roughly 6 people per household on average, that translates to 800,000 families in total. If 70% do not own any slaves, that leaves 30% or 240,000 families that do.

Of this 240,000, some 88% own fewer than 20 slaves, below the minimum needed to run a plantation.

The remaining 28,000 families or so qualify as “planter” elites, and they own 52% of all slaves.

Within this exclusive group, about 21,000 have 20-49 slaves, enough for a small plantation.

This leaves only 7,000 families (3%) owning the 50+ slaves required to efficiently run large or mega-plantations.

Herein lay the tycoon capitalists of the South – some 7,000 white planters overseeing the lives of the roughly 575,000 black persons they own.

<b># Slaves Owned</b>	<b>% of all Families</b>	<b>% of all Owners</b>	<b>% of all Slaves</b>	<b>Likely “Use” Of Slaves Owned</b>
<b>0</b>	70%	--	--	
<b>1</b>	5	17%	2%	Small farm
<b>2-4</b>	9	30	8	Small farm
<b>5-9</b>	7	24	15	Mid-sized farm
<b>10-19</b>	5	17	23	Larger farm
<b>20-49</b>	3	9	29	Small plantation
<b>50-99</b>	**	2	14	Large plantation
<b>100+</b>	***	1	9	Mega-plantation
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	

US Census

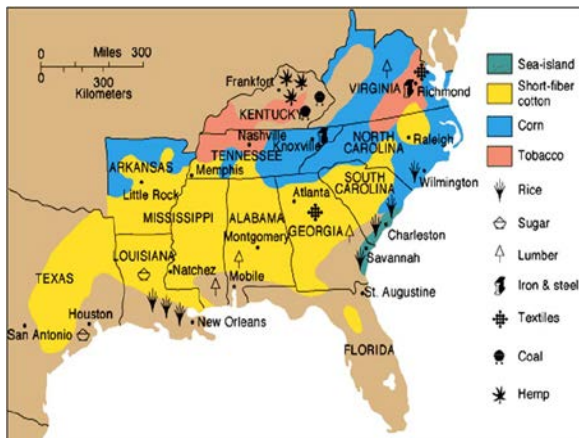
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The destinies of those enslaved on these plantations hinge on their owner’s search for new opportunities to increase their personal wealth, typically through participation in the region’s four crucial cash crops – tobacco, rice, sugar and cotton.

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Date: 1840

**The South’s Four Great Cash Crops**



The two dominant Southern crops of the 18th century are tobacco and rice, and together they account for most of the aristocratic planter families of colonial America.

Tobacco production is concentrated early on in Virginia and parts of North Carolina, with Kentucky and Tennessee coming on later. But growing tobacco is a complex and labor intensive undertaking, from transplanting seedling into the soil to proper fertilization and then harvesting. The tobacco leaves are heavy and dirty and, after cutting into “hands” (packets), they must be hung over five foot long poles to properly dry and cure. Getting all of this right is not easy.

Map Of The “Agricultural Belts” Across The South

Tobacco is also an “exploitive” plant, sucking nitrogen out of the soil and depleting its capacity to replenish needed nutrients year after year. The early growers are also either ignorant of the need for crop rotations or are too eager for short-term profits to care. Thus by 1840 much of the tobacco land is played out, and the Virginia planters in particular are searching for new options to protect their fortunes. One ominous answer will lie in “breeding” slaves for sale.

**Some of Virginia’s Elite Tobacco Families**

Names	Dates
Richard Lee	1617-1664
Robert “King” Carter	1663-1732
Benjamin Harrison III	1673-1710
William Byrd II	1674-1744
William Fairfax	1691-1757
William Beverley	1696-1756
Mann Page II	1716-1780
William Fitzhugh	1741-1809

Further south, along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, the gentry is built on the production of rice, ironically using methods taught them by their African slaves. Success is predicated on the presence of swampland, fed by non-saline freshwater rivers and lakes, and temperatures that are reliably warm during the 5-6 month growing season. Preparing and managing a rice field is an arduous task, first to drain and level the swamp, then to plant seedlings in the mud, finally to carefully add back water needed to support

growth and fight off weeds. Between April and September, stalks will reach about 18 inches, at which time they are cut down, left to dry in the sun for two weeks, then “flailed” to capture pods and milled to arrive at the desired rice kernels.

The entire process is fraught with risks. Inland swamps are subject to flooding after heavy rains, while coastal swamps are forever threatened by the ocean’s salt water. Losing a crop to water damage is not uncommon and severe financial losses can follow. Swampland is also the breeding ground for mosquitos and the two main killing diseases they transmit – malaria and yellow fever. Still, the mega-rice planters, scions like Joshua Ward at “Brookgreen” and William Aiken, Jr. on Jehossee Island, thrive in 1840, while searching westward toward swampland in Louisiana for the chance to expand.

**Some Of Carolina’s Elite Rice Families**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Joseph Blake	1663-1700
Arthur Middleton	1742-1787
Nathaniel Heyward	1766-1851
Joseph Alston	1779-1816
William Aiken, Sr.	1779-1831
Joshua Ward	1800-1853

Cotton of course becomes the South’s dominant cash crop in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It originates along the east coast from Virginia to Florida, as “sea island cotton,” noted for its remarkably long strands of fiber. It then moves inland after Eli Whitney invents his “(en)gine” in 1794, which efficiently sorts seeds from bolls and opens the door to growing “short strand/staple cotton.” Seeds are planted in the Spring; three foot high shrubs bearing flower buds (“bolls”) appear during the summer; and the back-breaking task of harvesting occurs in the autumn.

The crop tends to be hearty as long as droughts are avoided, weeding is completed, and the two key pests (bollworms and boll weevils) are contained. Once plantations open up from Alabama to Texas, cotton becomes the dominant source of wealth across the South.

**Some Of The South’s Elite Cotton Families**

<b>Name</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Dr. Stephen Duncan	Miss	1787-1867
John Manning	La	1815-1889
Joseph Acklen	La	1816-1863
John Robinson	Miss	1811-1870?
Jeremiah Brown	Ala	1800-1863
Elisha Worthington	Ark	1808-1873
Dr. John C. Jenkins	Miss	1809-1855

The fourth great Southern crop – sugar – takes off in Louisiana in the 1790’s, as a replacement for lagging sales of indigo dye. Advanced know-how in raising sugar cane arrives along with immigrants from plantations in Santo Domingo. It is a form of grass that develops into bamboo-like stalks which grow to 10-14 feet in height. Planting of seedling stalks occurs in the Fall, with fresh shoots appearing the following Spring, leading to summer growth and Fall harvesting. Then begins the elaborate process by which the stalks are crushed to give up their sugar juice, which is concentrated by repeated boiling into

“cane syrup” (or blackstrap molasses). Once cooled and further purified the syrup is converted into crystalized granules, first as brown sugar and, after more processing, as white sugar.

Credit goes to one Etienne de Bore (1741-1820), a Creole living on a plantation above New Orleans, and Haitian emigres, Antoine Morin and Antonio Menendez, for creating the first profitable operation to produce granulated sugar, around 1795. From there, Louisiana becomes the home of American sugar production and of some of the wealthiest planter families. The one main threat to success lies in the Louisiana weather where, unlike the Caribbean clime, a sudden frost can wipe out both a current sugar cane crop and future seedlings.

#### **Some Of Louisiana’s Elite Sugar Families**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Steven Minor	1760-1815
James Brown	1766-1835
Lewis Stirling	1786-1858
Michel Bringier	1789-1847
Wade Hampton II	1791-1858
John Burnside	1810-1881
Meredith Calhoun	1805-1869

Each of these four crops requires a minimum of 600 acres (1 square mile) of land and 20+ slaves to prosper. Then come the mega- plantations with over 100 slaves, which vary widely in acreage. Jefferson’s Monticello property spans 5,000 acres or 8 square miles. Washington’s Mount Vernon is larger, at 7600 acres. One of Joshua Ward’s rice plantations, “Brookgreen, ” extends over 9,000 acres, while William Aiken’s Jehossee Island is 33,000 acres, or an almost unimaginable 55 square miles.

But one thing they all have in common: success rests on owning enough slaves and then working them to near exhaustion, especially during the critical planting and harvesting seasons.

## Sidebar: The Southern Planter Tycoons



Planter James Marshman

### Twenty Largest Slave Owners Across The South

# Own	Name	Location	Mainly	Profile
2,340	Nathaniel Heyward (1766-1851)	Colleton, S.C.	Rice	“The Bluff.” A shrewd businessman who acquires 19 plantations over time. Dabbles in politics and signs “Nullification” doc. Nearly \$1 million estate at death in 1851.
1,130	Joshua J. Ward (1800-1853)	Georgetown, S.C.	Rice	“Brookgreen.” Known as “king of the rice planters.” Born on plantation, leads development of premium “Carolina gold long rice,” SC Lt Gov 1850-52.
858	Dr. Stephen Duncan (1787-1867)	Issaquena, Miss.	Cotton	“Saragossa.” Born in Pa, MD degree, to Natchez, efforts to re-colonize Africans, later anti-secession.
753	John Burnside (1810-1881)	Ascension, Louisiana	Sugar	“Houmas House.” Belfast, Ireland native, buys from Wade Hampton for \$1million.
709	Meredith Calhoun (1805-1869)	Rapides, Louisiana	Sugar	“Calhoun’s Landing.” From Pa to Red River estate, editor of <i>National Democrat</i> .
700	William Aiken, Jr. (1806-1887)	Colleton, S.C.	Rice	“Jehossee Island.” Other businesses are canals and railroads, SC Gov ’44-46 then US House ’51-57.
670	John Manning (1816-1889)	Ascension, Louisiana	Cotton	“Millford.” SC Gov son, Princeton, marries Hampton daughter, politics, SC Gov ’52-54, moderate secessionist, Beauregard staff in war, refuses oath to secure Senate seat.
659	Joseph Acklen (1816-1863)	W. Feliciana, Louisiana	Cotton	“Angola.” Lawyer, marries plantation heiress and widow of

				mega-slave trader Isaac Franklin, lawyer, link to Texas Republic, and triples value of estate.
631	R.F.W. Allston (1801-1864)	Georgetown, S.C.	Rice	“Chicora Wood.” West point grad, marries into elite JL Petigru family, scientific work on rice, SC Gov '56-58, opposes secession.
575	Joseph Blake (???)	Beaufort, S.C.	Rice	“Bonnie Hall.” One of three Blakes, all heirs of colonial era Gov of Carolina, own slaves in England also. Little known.
550	John Robinson (1811-1870's)	Madison, Miss.	Cotton	“Annandale.” Aristocratic life with little interest in farming operations.
540	Jeremiah Brown (1800-1863)	Sumter, Alabama	Cotton	“Lowden.” Son of wealthy Baptist minister, SC College, law, large donations to Howard College (later Samford), equips CSA troops
538	Arthur Blake (???)	Charleston, S.C.	Rice	“Blake’s Plantation.” Related to Joseph and Daniel. Little known.
530	John I. Middleton (1800-1877)	Beaufort, S.C.	Rice	“Middleton Place.” Family from Barbados, father was SC Gov and Amb to Russia, he supports re-opening global slave trade and secession.
529	Elisha Worthington (1808-1873)	Chicot, Arkansas	Cotton	“Sunnyside.” Little know beyond reported romance with slave and children attending anti-slavery Oberlin College.
527	Daniel Blake (???)	Colleton, S.C.	Rice	“Board House.” Related to Joseph and Arthur Blake. Little known.
523	Dr. John C. Jenkins (1809-1855)	Wilkinson, Miss.	Cotton	“Elgin.” Father a wealthy Pa. iron mfr, MD from Dickinson, inherits from uncle, scientific experiments, dies along with wife and many slaves in yellow fever outbreak.
511	J. Harleston Read (1815-1866)	Georgetown, S.C.	Rice	“Rice Hope.” Born on plantation and inherits from his MD father. Little known.
505	John Mease Butler (1808-1863)	McIntosh, Georgia	Rice Cotton	“Butler Plantation.” Inherits via mother, Sarah Meese, daughter of Rev War and founder, Pierce Butler, changes name to Butler, deplorable conditions, his brother (Pierce) even a worse master.
491	Charles Heyward (1802-1866)	Colleton, S.C.	Rice	“Rose Hill.” Grandfather signs Dec. of Independence, attends Princeton, keeps extensive illustrated diary about property.

Partially from Tom Blake (2001)

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Date: 1840

### The Practice Of Breeding Slaves



Six Young Boys

From early on, astute planters understand that “breeding” more slaves is both a necessity and a crucial opportunity for financial growth.

With the 1787 Constitution banning further importation of Africans as of 1808, owners must rely on their current slaves to reproduce sufficiently to offset workers lost to aging or death. Beyond that, however, they also recognize that any “excess” slaves sold will bring handsome profits in the auction market.

Thomas Jefferson, who sells 110 slaves in his lifetime, announces the cold calculations associated with “breeding” excess slaves in his *Farm Book* entries:

*I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm... What she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption.*

So slave children become “additions to the capital!” The numbers are stark and revealing:

- Twenty-six child-bearing years per woman, from age 18-44;
- A minimum of thirteen potential pregnancies, with early weaning to restart ovulation;
- Perhaps 8-10 children each, given the 66% survival rate at birth;
- At an average sale price of \$300, these offspring add \$2500-\$3000 in capital;
- All from the womb of one woman slave, before even counting her likely next generation females.

Despite these forecasted “returns,” the harsh conditions of slave life – between hard work, physical punishment, and unhealthy housing and diets – seldom lead on to 8-10 surviving offspring per female.

Jefferson, for example, only records one instance (Minerva Granger and her husband, Bagwell) of nine maturing children among his 175 slaves at Monticello.

By 1840, however, the ex-President’s economic insights are becoming apparent to more and more plantation owners, especially as growth from the tobacco and rice crops along the Atlantic coast states tapers off, and cotton sales begin to boom to the west. Production of the “white gold” jumps four-fold between 1820 and 1840, and the dollar value more than doubles, even at lower unit prices.

#### Value Of Cotton

Year	Cotton Lbs	Price/Lb	Total \$	% Ch
1820	142MM	\$16.58	\$235MM	
1840	587	9.00	526	+224%

Ransom estimates



Like clockwork, the demand for more cotton triggers the demand to “breed” more slaves, as attested to later recollections of freed blacks and owners alike.

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Date: 1840

### Testimonials Of Slaves And Masters About “Breeding”

Recollections of “slave breeding” abound in letters and diaries from the pre-war period, collected from both victims and perpetrators.

The ex-Georgia slave, William Ward, compares the practice to breeding livestock:

*Durin’ slavery if one marster had a big boy en ‘nuther had a big gal, de marsters made dem libe tergedder. Ef’n de woman didn’t hab any chilluns, she wuz put on de block en sold en ‘nuther woman bought. You see dey raised de chilluns ter mek money on jes lak we raise pigs ter sell.*

Chris Franklin, from Louisiana, reports on the humiliating “process” used by owners to select slaves for mating and to then insure that impregnation has occurred:

*On this plantation were more than 100 slaves who were mated indiscriminately and without any regard for family unions. If their master thought that a certain man and woman might have strong, healthy offspring, he forced them to have sexual relations even though they were married to other slaves. If there seemed to be any slight reluctance on the part of either of the unfortunate ones, “Big Jim” would make them consummate the relationship in his presence. He used the same procedure if he thought a certain couple was not producing children fast enough. He enjoyed these orgies.*

Hilliard Yellerday of North Carolina tells of her futile attempts to avoid bearing children she doesn’t want:

*I goes to de missy and tells her what Rufus wants and missy say dat am de massa’s wishes. She say, “Yous am de portly gal and Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants you-uns for to bring forth portly chillen. I’s thinkin bout what de missy say, but say to mysef, “I’s not gwine live with dat Rufus.” Dat night when him come in de cabin, I grabs de poker and sits on de bench and says, “Git “way from me, nigger, “fore I busts yous brains out and stomp on dem.” He say nothin” and git out. De nex” day de massa call me and tell me, “Woman, I’s pay big money for you and I’s done dat for de cause I wants yous to raise me chillens. I’s put yous to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn”t want whippin” at de stake, yous do what I wants.” I thinks “bout massa buyin” me offen de [auction] block and savin” me from bein” sep”rated from my folks and “bout bein” whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I’s to do? So I “cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields. . . .*

Owners also add their perspectives on slave breeding.

One observation belongs to Francis “Fannie” Kemble, a British actress married for a decade to the infamous planter, Pierce Mease Butler. She writes that her female slaves exhibited a...

*Distinct and perfect knowledge of their value to their owners as property...by bringing new slaves into the world....(declaring) look missis, little niggets for you and massa, plenty little niggits for you.*

Failure to meet an owner’s demands for more children are met with harsh retribution. Thus, Davison McDowell, master of “Exchange Plantation” in South Carolina notes in his diary on September 16, 1830:

*Sibby miscarried, believe she did so on purpose. Stop her Christmas (gift) and lock her up.*

Another South Carolinian, one David Gavin, reveals his own astonishing lack of compassion by reacting to the death of “Celia’s slave child” with the same self-centered irritation expressed over the loss of his horses.

*Celia's child, about four months old, died Saturday the 12th. That is two Negroes and three horses I have lost this year.*

A good summing up comes from the testimonial of ex-slave John Cole of Georgia, who ends by wondering aloud how “Christian men” could allow this “breeding” to exist:

*A slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman. Some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen years old. . . . Mother said there were cases where these young girls loved someone else and would have to receive the attentions of men of the master’s choice. This was a general custom. . . The masters called themselves Christians, went to church worship regularly and yet allowed this condition to exist.*

The explanation, of course, lies in the allure of personal greed which can trump all feelings of human empathy. Thus the utter sickness of slavery, with innocent children diminished to “additions to capital.”

And, by 1840, the value of total “slave capital” is already estimated to be \$938 million – with demand for excess laborers just taking off, as aspiring plantation owners cross into the cotton rich lands from Alabama to Texas.

**Value Of Slaves**

<b>Year</b>	<b># Slaves</b>	<b>\$/ Slave</b>	<b>Total \$</b>	<b>% Ch</b>
1820	1538M	\$393	\$604MM	
1840	2487	377	938	+155%

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Date: 1840

### **The Increase In Slave Pregnancies**

In response to growing demand for slaves, “total pregnancies” among black women are exceeding their white counterparts by 1840.

The first indication lies in the relative “fertility rate” – the number of children alive between the ages of 0-4 per thousand females aged 18-44 years old. This rate is 6% higher among black women.

**Children Aged 0-4 Per 1000 Women 20-44**

<b>Race</b>	<b>In 1840</b>
Blacks	1154
Whites	1085
Ratio (Black/White)	106%

Michael Haines, Colgate University

While data on “death rates” in the 0-4 age range are not available, there is good reason to believe that more black children are lost early, given their sub-par birth weights (5.5 lbs. on average), the fact they are quickly weaned off mother’s milk, and that their replacement diets are starch-laden and lacking in the balanced nutrients to sustain health.

Finally there are “stillborn rates,” which show that black infants are 57% more likely than white infants to die at birth.

**Stillborn Rates**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Per 1000 Births</b>
Whites	217 deaths
Enslaved Blacks	340
Ratio (Black/White)	157%

Michael Haines, Colgate University

Taken together, the evidence shows that by 1840 Southern owners are already upping the rate of black pregnancies to build their “inventories of excess slaves.”

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Date: 1840

**Shipment Of Slaves To The West**

The ultimate destinations for the “excess” slaves being bred are the new cotton plantations opening up west of the Appalachian range.

Thus the staggering growth in the slave population already occurring between 1820 and 1840 in states such as Mississippi (+595%), Missouri (+582%) and Alabama (+535%), along with the more than doubling recorded in Louisiana (+144%), and Tennessee (+128%), with Georgia (+88%) just behind.

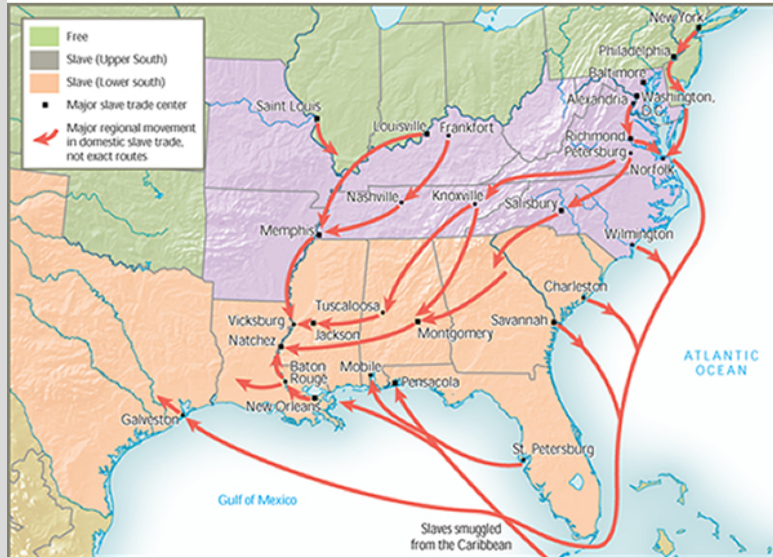
The leading “supplier states” for these western slaves is Virginia, with its very large black population (over 425,000 in 1820) and its need to address lagging profits on its tobacco plantations.

Other “slave breeder/supplier states” include North Carolina (also suffering erosion in its principal tobacco crops), South Carolina (the “rice kingdom,” but with most suitable lowlands already owned), and the two border states, Delaware (where only 2,600 slaves remain) and Maryland.

**Changes In Slave Populations By State**

<b>Old South</b>	<b>Statehood</b>	<b>1820</b>	<b>1840</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>% Ch</b>
South Carolina	1788	251,800	327,000	75,200	30
Georgia	1788	149,000	280,900	131,900	88
Virginia	1788	425,200	449,100	23,900	6
North Carolina	1789	205,000	245,800	40,800	20
Border States					
Delaware	1787	4,500	2,600	(1,900)	(42)
Maryland	1788	107,400	89,700	(17,700)	(16)
Kentucky	1792	126,700	182,200	55,500	44
Missouri	1821	10,000	58,200	48,200	582
Expanded South					
Tennessee	1796	80,100	183,100	103,000	128
Louisiana	1812	69,100	168,400	99,300	144
Mississippi	1817	32,800	195,200	162,400	595
Alabama	1819	47,400	253,500	206,100	535
Arkansas	1836	0	19,900	19,900	+++

**Sidebar: The Armfield Slave Coffle Of 1834**



Map of Domestic Slave Trading Routes Opened By 1840

The task of rounding up excess slaves in Virginia and other eastern states and transporting them west and south for sale belongs to a small group of firms which accumulate vast wealth from their efforts.

One pioneer slave trading firm is Franklin & Armfield, headquartered as of 1828 in Alexandria, Virginia. Residing there is John Armfield, who is born in 1797 in North Carolina. His uncle and partner is Isaac Franklin, born in 1789 to a Tennessee planter, veteran of the War of 1812, astute investor, and owner of plantations of his own in Tennessee and Louisiana. Over time the two develop a transportation route for moving “herds” of slaves overland for some 650 miles from Alexandria to Nashville, then from there to river barges for another 500-700 mile journey toward auction houses in Natchez, Mississippi, and New Orleans.

One such transport – known as the “Armfield Coffle of 1834” – sets out with 300 slaves in August. A witness describes the sight as follows:

*Armfield sat on his horse in front of the procession, armed with a gun and a whip. Other white men, similarly armed were arrayed behind him. They were guarding 200 men and boys lined up in twos, their wrists hand-cuffed together, a chain running the length of their hands. Behind the men another 100 women and children were tied with rope. Then came six or seven big wagons carrying food, infants, and suits of clothing reserved to display the negroes at auction.*

A list of six children who made this particular journey survives:

**Some Slave Children In The 1834 Coffle**

Name	Gender	Age	Height
Bill Keeling	Male	11	4’5”
Elizabeth	Female	10	4’1”
Monroe	Male	12	4’7”
Lovey	Female	10	3’10”
Robert	Male	12	4’4”
Mary Fitchett	Female	11	4’11”

The “coffle” moves at about three miles an hour and 20 miles a day in the sweltering summer heat. It travels from Alexandria along a variety of trails beginning with the Great Wagon Road through the Shenandoah Valley. On September 6, it makes a risky 125 yard crossing of the New River, south of Roanoke to avoid a ferry toll. From there it moves west toward Knoxville and then to Gallatin, Tennessee, some 30 miles northeast of Nashville.

Once there, Amfield turns the “coffle” over to Isaac Franklin’s nephew, James, to complete the final legs of the trip. While records end at this point, the slaves are likely put on flatboats for a three day ride down the Cumberland River to the Ohio, and then one more day to connect with the Mississippi. After another two week voyage south, they will likely dock at Natchez for sale. A contemporary visitor to that city claims that...

*There is no branch of trade in this part of the country more brisk and profitable than that of buying and selling negroes.*

The terminal for Armfield’s Coffle of 1834 is probably Isaac Franklin’s auction house located at Forks of the Road, near the end of the Natchez Trace. It has removed to this remote site after Franklin is caught in 1833 burying slaves who have died of cholera, causing panic and reprisals by city officials.

Sales at the Forks site follow a ritual, with slaves dressed up in finery and first paraded en masse in front of potential bidders.

*The men dressed in navy blue suits with shiny brass buttons...as they marched singly and by twos and threes in a circle...The women wore calico dresses and white aprons, with pink ribbons in their hair.*

After this showing, they are grouped by age and size, within gender. Sales are determined by haggling, not by an auctioneer. Thus a prospective buyer will point to a prospect, who will follow them to a more private site for closer inspection. This typically involves undressing and standing naked while examination is made of teeth and backs, the latter in search of prior whip marks, signaling defiance. Slaves may also be asked to speak, sing or dance, and to describe what work and skills they possess.

The entire process is one of abject humiliation.

Some of the “Armfield Coffle” may have ended up in New Orleans, the biggest slave “market” in the country, with over fifty dealers in business. A white visitor expresses his discomfort at the wide open nature of the city:

*You have to squeeze through a countless multitude of men, women and children of all ages, tongues and colors of the earth until you get into the city proper. (The people) are made of the worst portion of the human race. No wonder that there should be robberies and assassinations in such a population.*

The actual auctions are often seen as social events, with gawkers outnumbering bidders. Advertisements in local papers boast of “Virginia bred” slaves (meaning compliant) and “fancy girls” (sex slaves) who often go for top dollar. A diary records one such sale of a woman named Hermina:

*On the block was one of the most beautiful women I ever saw...She was sold for \$1250 to one of the most lecherous looking old brutes I ever set eyes on.*

The “Armfield Coffle of 1834” is, of course, only one incident in an “industry” that thrives, as prospective plantation owners move west. In total, it’s estimated that over a half million American born enslaved persons are sold over the years in New Orleans. Among the results are shattered families, and heart-rending “seeking notices” that follow after the end of the Civil War. One example from a Mary Haynes, living in Texas:

*I wish to inquire after my relatives whom I left in Virginia about twenty-five years ago. My mother’s name was Matilda. My name was Mary. I was nine years old when I was sold to a trader named Walker, who carried us to North Carolina. My younger sister Bettie was sold to a man named Reed, and I was sold and carried to New Orleans and from there to Texas. I had a brother, Sam, and a sister, Annie, who were left with mother. If they are alive, I will be glad to hear from them.*