Peculiar institution



lervns CH APT ER 8 The "Peculiar Institution', : Slaves Tell Their Own Story ii THE PROBLEM With the establishment of its nelw government in 1789, ihe United States became a r. irtual rnagaet for foieign traveiers, perhaps never more so than during the three Cecades immediately preceding our Civil IVar. N{iddle to up_per class, interesied in everything from politics to prison reform to botanical specimens to the position of women in American society, these cu_ rious travelers fanrred out across the United States, and almost all wrote about their observ-ations in ieLters, pamphlets, anci books widej-v read orr both sides of rhe ocean.

Regardlcss of their special interests, ho*. ever, ferv travelers f. itled to notice-an. d comment on-the " peciiliar instrtution', of' -frican Anre, rican slal, e,-v. As rl'ere narl-v nineteenth-cenlurr. 'onterr writers, English author Har_ i*t inter_ riet Martineau was especially tc exploit female slaves sexually, a practice that often produced mulatto children born into slavery. The young Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to study the Ameri_ can penitentiary system and stayed to investigate politics and society.

In his book Democracy in America (1g42), Tocqueville expressed his belief that American slaves had completelr. lost their . drican cuiture-their custorns. lariguages, religions, ancl even ihememoriesof their countries. An Eng_]ish novelist rvho 4/as enor. moLr_. lv poprrlar in the ! p; 1" 6 Srrtr. -.. : t-,. ested in those aspects of American so_ ciety that affected women and chil_ dren. She was appalled by the slave system, believing ii deg:: adcd mar_ riage by aliowing southern white rnen [1791 - , II {. (: ul, IAIt 3ftr1'loN": . rrls 1'III, I, , tEIR O'N .+, r()ItY rusty Charles Dickens, also visited in 1842. He spent very little time in the South but collected (and published)

advertisemenis lor runaway slaves that contained gruesome descriptions of their burns, brandings, scars, and iron culfs and collars. As Dickens departed for a steamboat trip to bhe West. he wrote that he left " with a glateful heart that I was not doomed to live where slavery was, and had never had my s 'nses blunted to its wrongs and horrors in a slave-rocked cradle. " I mer wrote to her sister that " they are ugly, but appear for the most part cheerful and well-fed. 2 Her subsequent trips to the plar. lations of the th' gir m(stz backcountry, however, increased her sympalhy for slaves and her distrust of white southerners' assertions that " slaves are the happiest people in the world. " I In fact, by the end o. her stay, Bremer was praising ihe slaves' morality, patience, Ia, cnts, and religior, s practices. to tht m(sla alc ev(gio m3 1850s, Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish novelist, traveled throughoul the United States for two vears and spent considerable time in Soulh Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana.

After her first encounters with African Americans in Charieston, Bre- In the turbulent These traveiers-and many moreadded their opinions to the growing litei" ature about the nature of American slavery and its effects. But the over- sla dot pr(whelming majority of this literature was written by white people. What did the slaves themselves think? How did they express their feelings about the peculiar institution of slavery? mi iio; sla (al' SIn sla inc I it BACKGROUND JI 'F the wh 3i cilL

By the time of theAmerican Revolution, rvhat haci begrm in 1619 as a trickle of Africans intended to supplement the farm labor of inderrtured servants from Engiano had sweiled to a slave population of approximately 500, 000 people, the majority concentrated on tobacco, rice. and cotton piantations in

the South. Moreover, as the African American population greu', rvhat apparen'uly had been a fairly- ioose and unregimented labor s-r. stem gradually evoived into an increasingly' harsh, rigrd. and complete Charies Dickens. Anteri-can Notes arid Picrr; res ircn 1lol-y rLcnCon: Oxlold Unrversit. v Press. 1957), p. 3?. system of chattel slavery that tried to control neariy every aspect of the slaves' iives. By 1775, African Ameiican slavery had become a significant (some wouki have said indispensable) part of southern iife. The American Revolution did nct reverse those trends. Although northern states in which African American slavery was nol so deeply rocted began instituting graduai emancipation, after the Revolution, the slave systemas well as its harshness-increased in the pio the Vir wh wh sec sor_ tha mo his no1 ag(2. Fredrika Brenrer, ,|'nttri, ctt ol' the Fi. fties: i. Letters of

Fredriha Brenier. cd. Adolph B.

Benson (Nerv York: "{melic: rrr , Scandinavian Foundation, I92-1r. p. 96. : I e 3 ibid , p. 1r. t0 f1801 ITAOKGROUND the South. The invention of the cotton gin, which enabled seeds to be removed from the easily grown short stapie cotton, permitted southerners to cultivat, e collon on the uplands, scale, and sell-preservation other. . . . in the t the Lay, moOUS iftcan ,'er- tire did drd t, he thereby spurring the westward movement of the piantation system anci slavery. As-a result, slaverv expanded along , with settlement into nearly bverv area of the South: the . Gulf region, Tennessee, Kentucky, and uitimately Texas.

Simulianeously, the slave population burgeoned, roughly doubling every thirty years (from approximately 700, 000 in 1790 to 1. 5 million in 1820 to more'than 3. 2 mitiion in 1850). Because importation of slaves from Africa was banned in 1808 (although there was some iilegal slave smuggiing), most further gains in the By this time, ho*'ever, Jelferson was nearly alone among rvhite southerners. Most did not question the assertion that siaver-i 'as a necessity, that it was gooti for both the slave and the owrlrr, and that it nrusr be preserved at nny cost. Ir of[en has been pointed oul that lhe majority of rvhite southerners did not own slaves.

In fact, the proportion of white southern families who did own slaves was actualiy declining in the nineteenth century, from one- Int 1e) rot : han an efsouthern population, and ihose siaveholders with large plantations and But as the sla. re population grew, the fears and anxieties of southern hundreds of slaves were an exceedingly small group. whites grew correspondingly. Il 1793, How, then, did the pecuiiar institua slave rebellion in the Caribbean tion of slavery, as one southerner caused tremendous consternation in the white South. Rurrrors of uprisings called it. become so embeddeci in the piotted by slaves were numerous. nd Old South? Firsr. even though only a the actual rebeilion of Nat Turner in minority of southern whir" es owned Virginia in 1831 (in which fifty-five slaves, nearly all southern whites whites 'were killed, many of them were somehorv touched by the instit'. rtion of slavery. Fear of black r iprisings r, r'hile asieep) only increased white inpiorrrp'r" ed many nonsiaveholders to securities and dread. In response, support an increasingly rigrd slave southern states passed a series oflaws that made the system of siavery even system that included night patrols, more restrictive.

Toward the end of rvritten passes for slaves arvay fi-om his life, Thomas Jefferson (r. i'ho did plantations. supen'ised religious servnot live to see Nat Turner's uprising) ices for slales, larr, s prohibiting teaching slaves to read or rvrite. and other agonized: measLlres to keep slar'es ignorant, cieP" itdeltt. ttrd a]r', ar': undt' thr ,, J. pi 1, 1" But as it rs. r, e lrrve : hc rvolf bv rho rr Irit,'s. 1lrny non: lavehuicl,. r. - ; t. : o ears, and we can neither hold him, nor rt'ere ah'5id ttat emancipation rvoulci safel-v let hirr go. iustice is in one hling rherrr : nto dilect nc,, n,, n., (. (, nrincrease. slave population were frorn natural "^rird in 1830 to roughly one-fourth b-v 1860. Moreover, nearly three-fourths of these slaveholders owned fewer than ten slaves. Slaveholders, then, lvere a distinct minorrty of the white f1811 t, EuLIAII; fTIoN": TEI, I, 'S, IR OWN fr)til' can Americans partly rested on the limitation of rights and freedoms for nally, although large planters repre-southern whites as well. I sented only a lraction of the white But how did the sla{'es reacL to population, they virtually controlled irn economic and social system that the econophic. ocial, and political in- meanL that neither they nor their chilstilutionsftnd were not about to injure dren would ever experience freedom? either thcmselves or their status by Most while southerners assumed that eliminating. the slave. syslem that es- slaves were happy and content. Northsentially supporred thern., ern abolitionists (a minority of the po defend their peculiar institution, ivhite population) believed that slaves rvhite southerners constructed a re- continually yearned for I : edom. Both markabiy complete and citiverse sel of groups used oceans of ink to justify arguments.

Siavery, they maintained, and support their claims. But evidence was actually a far more humane svs- of hor+' the slaves felt and thc'ught is tem than northern capitalism. After woefully sparse. Given the restrictile ail,

slaves s/ere fed, clothed, shelrered, nature of the slave syltem (which incared for *'hen they rvere ill, and sup- cluded enforced illiteracy among ported in their old age, rvhereas north- slaves), this pitiful lack of evidence is ern factory workers were paid pitifully hardiy surprising. lorv rvages, used, dnd then discarded llow, then, cail we learn horv slaves when no longer usefui. I'ur'+. ernrore, feit, and ihought about the pecuiiar inmany . , r'hite southei'ners maintained stitution? Slave uprisings were few, that slavery was a positive good be- but does that mean most slaves were cause ir had introduced the " barba- happy with their lot? Runaways were rous" Africans to civilized Americah. common, and some, such as Frederick ways and, rnore importantiy, to Chris- Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, actuaily tianitl'. Other southern rvhites reached the North and wrote about stressei rvhat they believed lvas the their experiences as slaves. Yet how childirke. ciependent nature of African typical were their experiences?

Most Americans, insisting that they could slaves were born, lived, and died in neyer cope with iife outside the pater- servitude. did not participate in organnaiistic and " benevolent" institution ized revoits, and did not run awaS'. oi iiavri-'. in si_ich zin atmorphere, in Fiow ciid they feel about the system of rvhich many of the white southern in- slavery? tellectr, ral efforts rvent into the defense Aithough most slaves did not read or of slaven. , ciissent anci freedom of wrile, did not participate in organized thought rvere not welcome. Hence revolts, and did not attempt to run those rr'hite southerners rvho dis- away. hey did leave a remarkable agreed anci might have challenged the amount of evidence thal can help us unScuth's ciependence on siarery re- derstand their thoughts and leeiings. mained

siient. *ere hushed up, or de- Yet we must be imagrnative in horl. rve cided rcr lear. e rhe region. In man, r, approach and use that evidence. wa, vs. ihen, the enslavement of Afri- peiition with blacks; who, it was assumed, would drive down wages. Fi- In that birti size, fortf ordir bn t, tion. help who eCOnl the p of th will I and evide sout, I ing r trave often ore Nort the them gand ecdot rich tives r iave Ligat, pecur Histr awar denc, most eight older' thev [182] THFI ilE]'ilol) rl- JM? /" li' ! i. re tves iolh +iA, ,! r rJi , ltcc iis iive inong eis ves inere ere ick illv rut nii in a-v. In an earlier chapter, you discovered (about births, deaths, age at marriage, farm size, inheritance, tax . rolls, and so forth) can reveal a great deal about ordinary people, such. as the colonists on the eve of the American Revolution. Such demographic evidence can help the, historian form a picture of who these people were and the socioeconomic trends of the time, even if the people themselves . ere not aware of those trends. In this exercise, you will tre using another kind of evidence and asking different questions. Your eviCence will not . come f" om white southerners (rvhose stake in maintaining slavery was enormous), foreiga travelers (wh-ose own cultural biases often influenced ', vhai they reported), or even white abolitionists in the North (whose urgent need to eradicate the "sin" of slavery sometimes led them to gross exaggerations for propaganda purposes). You will be using anecdotes, stories, and songs froia the rich orai tradition of African American slaves, supplemente