

Peculiar institution



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Chapter 8 The "Peculiar Institution": Slaves Tell Their Own Story
 THE PROBLEM With the establishment of its new government in 1789, the United States became a virtual magnet for foreign travelers, perhaps never more so than during the three decades immediately preceding our Civil War. Middle to upper class, interested in everything from politics to prison reform to botanical specimens to the position of women in American society, these curious travelers fanned out across the United States, and almost all wrote about their observations in letters, pamphlets, and books widely read on both sides of the ocean.

Regardless of their special interests, however, few travelers failed to notice and comment on the "peculiar institution" of African American slavery. As early as the nineteenth century, French writers, English author Harriet Martineau was especially to exploit female slaves sexually, a practice that often produced mulatto children born into slavery. The young Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to study the American penitentiary system and stayed to investigate politics and society.

In his book *Democracy in America* (1842), Tocqueville expressed his belief that American slaves had completely lost their African culture—their customs, languages, religions, and even the memories of their countries. An English novelist who was enormously popular in the 1840s, Fanny Fern, focused in those aspects of American society that affected women and children. She was appalled by the slave system, believing it degraded marriage by allowing southern white men [1791–1842]. The English novelist Charles Dickens, also visited in 1842. He spent very little time in the South but collected (and published)

advertisements for runaway slaves that contained gruesome descriptions of their burns, brandings, scars, and iron cuffs and collars. As Dickens departed for a steamboat trip to the West, he wrote that he left "with a grateful heart that I was not doomed to live where slavery was, and had never had my senses blunted to its wrongs and horrors in a slave-rocked cradle." I never wrote to her sister that "they are ugly, but appear for the most part cheerful and well-fed." Her subsequent trips to the plantations of the South's backcountry, however, increased her sympathy for slaves and her distrust of white southerners' assertions that "slaves are the happiest people in the world." In fact, by the end of her stay, Bremer was praising the slaves' morality, patience, labors, and religious practices.

In the 1850s, Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish novelist, traveled throughout the United States for two years and spent considerable time in South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana.

After her first encounters with African Americans in Charleston, Bremer's turbulent travels—and many more—added their opinions to the growing literature about the nature of American slavery and its effects. But the overwhelming 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?

BACKGROUND: If the white civil

By the time of the American Revolution, what had begun in 1619 as a trickle of Africans intended to supplement the farm labor of indentured servants from England had swelled to a slave population of approximately 500,000 people, the majority concentrated on tobacco, rice, and cotton plantations in

was banned in 1808 (although there was some illegal slave smuggling), most further gains in the By this time, however, Jefferson was nearly alone among white southerners. Most did not question the assertion that slavery was a necessity, that it was good for both the slave and the owner, and that it must be preserved at any cost. It often has been pointed out that the majority of white southerners did not own slaves.

In fact, the proportion of white southern families who did own slaves was actually declining in the nineteenth century, from one-third in the early southern population, and those slaveholders with large plantations and But as the slave population grew, the fears and anxieties of southern hundreds of slaves were an exceedingly small group. Whites grew correspondingly. In 1793, How, then, did the peculiar institution of slavery in the Caribbean cause such a rebellion, as one southerner caused tremendous consternation in the white South. Rumors of uprisings called it. become so embedded in the plot by slaves were numerous. And Old South? First, even though only a the actual rebellion of Nat Turner in minority of southern whites owned Virginia in 1831 (in which fifty-five slaves, nearly all southern whites whites were killed, many of them were somehow touched by the institution of slavery. Fear of black uprisings (while asleep) only increased white inferiority and many non-slaveholders to securities and dread. In response, support an increasingly rigid slave southern states passed a series of laws that made the system of slavery even system that included night patrols, more restrictive.

Toward the end of his written passes for slaves away from his life, Thomas Jefferson (who did plantations. supervised religious servants not live to see Nat

slaves were fed, clothed, sheltered, nature of the slave system (which included enforced illiteracy among ported in their old age, whereas north-slaves), this pitiful lack of evidence is ern factory workers were paid pitifully hardly surprising. Inevitably, used, and then discarded. How, then, can we learn how slaves when no longer useful. Furthermore, and I thought about the peculiar institution, white southerners maintained it? Slave uprisings were few, that slavery was a positive good but does that mean most slaves were happy with their lot? Runaways were common, and some, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, actually fled. Other southern whites reached the North and wrote about what they believed was the typical nature of African slaves. Yet how childlike dependent nature of African slaves were their experiences?

Most Americans, insisting that slaves were born, lived, and died in never cope with life outside the paternal servitude. did not participate in organized revolts, and did not run away. In such an atmosphere, in how did they feel about the system of which many of the white southern slavery? Intellectual efforts went into the defense. Although most slaves did not read or write, did not participate in organized thought were not welcome. Hence revolts, and did not attempt to run those white southerners who disappeared. They did leave a remarkable amount of evidence that can help us understand their thoughts and feelings. maintained

silent. *ere hushed up, or de- Yet we must be imaginative 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 l and evide sout, l 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 , Itcc 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), foreigna travelers (wh-ose own cultural biases often influenced ', vhai they reported), or even white abolitionists in the North (whcse 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