

### A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade

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## Review

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**Gudmestad, Robert H.** *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*. Louisiana State University Press, \$59.95, hardcover \$21.95, softcover ISBN 0807128848, hardcover 0807129224, softcover

Traffickers of flesh

The buying and selling of bondsmen

Of all the evils of slavery, none was more deplorable than the brutal commercial traffic in chattels, whether they were victims of the trans-Atlantic or domestic slave trade. In this revised dissertation completed at Louisiana State University under the direction of Charles Royster, Robert Gudmestad, an assistant professor at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri, examines the latter with particular emphasis on its dramatic growth after 1820 and the consequent implications for both the master-slave relationship and the slave system in general. After a hiatus of more than fifty years since the publication of Frederic Bancroft's pioneering work *Slave Trading in the Old South*, Michl Tadman stepped in to fill an obvious void in slave scholarship with the publication in 1990 of his major study of the interstate trade entitled *Speculators and Slaves*. Now Gudmestad has provided a useful supplement to these earlier works.

In his analysis of the interregional movement of slaves, the author draws a distinction between those who were carried to the Southwest by migrating masters and those who were transported by speculators or professional traders. On page 4, he defines the latter as those "who bought slaves in one state and sold them in another on a regular basis as the sole or principal source of [their] income." Gudmestad estimates that in the seventy years from 1790 to 1860 no fewer than one million slaves were transported across state lines, and, like Tadman, he calculates that one-third of slave marriages in the exporting states were destroyed by forced sales. But it was not until the 1820s that professional slave traders superseded migrating slaveowners as the predominant agents in this

massive slave migration.

Because of their callous disregard for family ties to say nothing of their ruthless exploitation of female slaves, the speculators initially were treated with contempt by the more genteel members of southern society. For example, planters who journeyed to the Upper South to purchase slaves often went to great lengths to disassociate themselves from the professional traders in order to avoid the stigma attached to the latter. However, the relentless demand for additional slaves to cultivate the fertile cotton fields of the Deep South and the simultaneous pressure on Upper South planters to salvage their depressed fortunes by selling excess slaves combined to make the interregional slave trade an integral and essential part of the "peculiar institution." The abolitionists were quick to seize upon this nefarious traffic as the most vulnerable facet of the slave system. Thus, the slave trade became a prime target in the petitions that flooded the House of Representatives in the mid-1830s and led to the adoption in 1836 of the so-called Gag Rule.

By 1840 even southern evangelicals had come "to accept the slave trade as a regular and necessary part of southern society." For their part, the large traders sought to mitigate criticism by purchasing slaves in family units, studiously refraining from kidnapping defenseless victims, and using agents as a barrier against societal criticism. By these and other means they managed to achieve some degree of respectability in the late antebellum period, although many continued to be viewed as the collective scapegoat for the evils of slavery.

In a splendid epilogue, Gumestad focuses upon three legacies of Isaac Franklin, the notorious senior partner in Franklin & Armfield, the largest domestic slavetrading firm in the nation. The first legacy is the conversion of Franklin's Fairvue estate near Gallatin, Tennessee, into a gated community replete with clubhouse and bed-and-breakfast accommodations; the second is the location of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, Franklin's principal Louisiana plantation; and the third is the conversion of the firm's Alexandria, Virginia, slave prison into a museum appropriately named "Freedom House." He might have added a fourth. The Ackland Art Museum on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was originally funded by a donation from the son of Franklin's widow Adelia, who later married Joseph A.S. Acklen and brought to that marriage the wealth accumulated through the slave trade by her first husband.

This book is based upon impressive research in a variety of primary sources, principally newspapers, periodicals, and government documents. Although a number of manuscript sources from more than two dozen archives are listed in the bibliography, there are few citations to them in the footnotes. It is particularly regrettable that the author did not make more extensive use of the Rice Carter Ballard Papers in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill, although they would have simply confirmed Gudmestad's quite proper depiction of the slave speculator as one of the most unsavory characters in southern history. On more substantive matters, I would suggest that slave prices were higher in the Lower South than elsewhere not only because speculators drove up the price, as Gudmestad speculates on page 11, but also because there was a greater demand for them there. Nor am I persuaded that ending slavery in Virginia would have sharply reduced the number of slaves for sale, thereby driving up prices in the Lower South and ultimately, as the author contends on page 173, placing in jeopardy the "expansion of the entire South." That might have been true in the long run, but if the gradual emancipation plan proposed in 1840 by Thomas Jefferson Randolph had been adopted, many owners would have disposed of their slaves before emancipation became effective just as their northern counterparts had done after the American Revolution.

These caveats aside, Professor Gudmestad has provided readers with a well written, clearly articulated analysis of the transformation of the domestic slave trade after the second decade of the nineteenth century. Less polemical than the Tadman work that preceded it, this study enhances our understanding of the traffic in human beings that constituted one of the worst of the many evils surrounding the enslavement of Africans in the antebellum South.

*William K. Scarborough (University of Southern Mississippi) is the author or editor of five books and numerous articles on the Civil War and the plantation South. His latest book, Masters of the Big House (LSU Press, 2003) won the Jules and Frances Landry Award from LSU Press, and he was the recipient in February, 2004, of the Richard Wright Award for Literary Excellence for the entire body of his work.*