

Excerpted From:

Foner, E. (2011). *Voices of freedom: A documentary history* (3rd ed.). New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

64. Rise of the Cotton Kingdom (1836)

Source: Fredrick Norcom: Fredrick Norcom to James C. Johnston, January 24, 1836. #324, Hayes Collection. Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Reprinted with permission.

In some ways, the most dynamic feature of the American economy in the first forty years of the nineteenth century was the rise of the Cotton Kingdom. The early industrial revolution, which began in England and soon spread to parts of the North, generated an immense demand for cotton, a crop the Deep South was particularly suited to growing because of climate and soil fertility. Slavery, which many Americans had expected to die out because its major crop, tobacco, exhausted the soil, now embarked on a remarkable period of expansion. Settlers from the older southern states flooded into Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

The letter that follows was written by Fredrick Norcom, who migrated from North Carolina to Vicksburg, Mississippi, to James Johnson, a planter in Edenton, North Carolina. Norcom describes the feverish speculation in cotton, land, and slaves.

I HAVE MET with I suppose from 50 to 100 men who (many of them are entirely destitute of a common education) five years since could not get credit for a pair of shoes, now worth 100,000 to a million of dollars—I have seen a great number who came here rich, and now immensely rich; I have not seen but one single soul, nor have I heard of three, who have failed—and these were all merchants, who without much Capital went to speculating in Cotton—. It is in truth the only country I ever read or heard of, where a poor man could in two or three years without any aid, become wealthy—A few days of labour and lying out in the woods enabled them to find out a good body of land, and not having the money to enter it for themselves, they would sell their information to those who were too idle, or too rich to undergo the fatigue of hunting for it; by this means they would obtain money enough to enter one section, then two, and so on; soon sell that for ten or twenty times as much as they gave for it, and sometimes would absolutely make what is considered in the old States a fortune in five or six months. . . .

At Pontotoc in the Chickasaw Nation, there was 4 to 5 millions of dollars lying last summer to be employed in land; at the sales in December at Columbus, there was more than 5 millions, how much at the other land offices I have not heard.

All the lands obtained from the Choctaw Indians in 1832 have now been offered for sale; the greater part of the choice land of course was taken up the first year or two, and that now sells from \$50–75 to 100 per acre, according to location—the second rate is selling from 20 to 40 per acre, and the third rate of which there is much yet remaining, is selling from 8 to 20 per acre—you can thus see how easy it was to get rich here—a little labour would raise \$800—that will enter a section of land, to sell that for 10, to \$20,000, and lay that out again and get in return 10 or 20 for one, is an easy and rapid mode of getting rich. . . . The demand for all species of property here is great, constant and increasing—I cannot ascertain what amount of property has been sold in any one county. More than 6,000 Negroes and 10,000 horses and mules have been sold in Yazoo County alone,

and from 1st Sept. up to this time (and I am told it so continues until April) there are Negroes by the hundred in every little Log-Village for sale....

I know of no point in the world with four times its population which sells so many goods, Negroes and provisions &c and if things go on at this rate long, we must soon have 20,000 population; goods are lying here in store in quantities, waiting for stores to be built, and all species of houses are going up as if by Magic weekly: property bought in the edge of Town twelve months since for \$200 per acre sold for \$4,000 per acre last week—. All species of labour here cost three times as much as at Edenton, and as a general rule most every thing costs about four times as much as in the old States, except Negroes—prime man and woman together sell for \$2,000—the ordinary mode of selling here is man and wife.

Questions

1. How does Norcom's letter suggest the interconnection between the fate of Native Americans and the opportunities open to white migrants to Mississippi?
2. What were likely to have been the effect on slaves of the speculative process described in the letter?

65. William Sewall, The Results of British Emancipation (1860)

Source: William G. Sewall, *The Ordeal of Free Labor in the British West Indies* (New York, 1861), pp. 311-17.

By 1850, slavery was on the road to abolition in most of the Western Hemisphere. The British had abolished slavery in their Caribbean colonies in 1833, the French in 1848. The newly independent nations of Spanish

America had adopted plans for gradual emancipation. Only in the United States, Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico did slavery survive.

Americans followed carefully the results of emancipation elsewhere in the hemisphere and its aftermath became part of debate over slavery. Was abolition a success or failure? Defenders of slavery in the American South pointed to the decline in sugar production in the key British island of Jamaica as proof that blacks would not work productively except as slaves. Abolitionists insisted that the planters had failed to adapt to the system of free labor, and that the lives of the former slaves had improved in numerous ways. On the eve of the Civil War, William G. Sewall published a series of articles in the *New York Times* reporting on conditions in the British West Indies and defending the abolition of slavery there. His account appeared as a book the following year.

EMANCIPATION WAS AN isolated experiment in each of the different colonies. Precedents and rules of action for one were no precedents or rules of action for another. Here there were obstacles to overcome and difficulties to surmount which there did not exist, or existed only in a mitigated form. Each colony was a field of battle upon which the banners of free labor and slave labor were flung to the winds; and while in some, where resistance was feeble, all trace of the contest has disappeared, and prosperity has revived, in others, where resistance was strong and determined, the exhaustion that follows a long war and a long reign of oppression weighs heavily upon a dispirited people. Let us not be deceived. Let us not misinterpret the true meaning of Jamaica's desolation at the present time. Let no one be so mad as to believe that it is the work of freedom.... Let no one question the victory, though its choicest fruits are yet to be reaped. Let no one doubt that freedom, when it overturned a despotism and crushed a monopoly, unshackled, at the same time, the commerce, the industry, and the intelligence of the islands, and laid the foundations of permanent prosperity....

If free labor be tested by any other gauge than that of sugar production, its success in the West Indies is established beyond all