

Seven Score and Ten

The Civil War Sesquicentennial Day by Day

April 1, 1861: Economics of slavery

Posted on April 1, 2011 by Allen Gathman

As [The American Civil War](#) pointed out the other day, the Richmond Daily Dispatch was trying hard to drum up support for secession in Virginia. Here the editor touts the economic benefits of slavery, though I think he's neglected to consider difference in soil fertility of the counties he's comparing. Some of those counties may be more productive (and use more slaves) because they have better soil for cotton production.

Meanwhile, he also points out the disadvantage of immigrants as laborers — they earn money and move up in economic status, and quit wanting to do grunt labor. That's not a problem with slaves!

Nothing could be more preposterous, nothing more stupid, than the dogma that slavery is a curse to a country. On the contrary, the heaviest calamity that could befall any slave State on this continent, the greatest curse that an angry Providence could inflict upon the South, would be the destruction of its slave institution. The North ascribe its own rapid increase in population and wealth chiefly to the immigration of foreigners; and does so with reason. The foreigner comes over, in the general, destitute, obliged to work, and willing to labor with his own hands. The Yankee lives upon his wits; but the foreign laborer is a real producer— he works with his own hands, he digs the earth, and he produces food for his own consumption as well as for that of his Yankee taskmaster. Well may the North ascribe its prosperity in a great degree to the immigrant; for that individual becomes a producer from the outset, and not until he accumulates a little capital by his manual industry, does he imitate the Yankee, resort to his wits for a livelihood, and resolve himself into a consumer.

It is from immigration that the North derives its chief want, its most exigent desideratum — labor, manual labor; dirt digging, soil tilling labor; the labor decreed against man by the curse of Eden; the labor that brings to his brow the dust and the sweat. Various are the devices which the Yankee contrives to avoid, himself, this sweat of the brow— machines without number, factories where women and girls are made to work in droves; ligneous nutmegs and hams; protective tariffs, and like inventions. But the influx of penniless immigrants from Europe, was the Yankee's godsend— poor, necessitous, stout, sinewy immigrants, used to privation and toil, willing to labor with their hands, anxious to barter their service for mere bread. But the evil of immigrant labor is, that it is not permanent. Industry in our flourishing country soon brings its reward of accumulated means and easy competency. The humble, industrious immigrant soon grows too well-to-do to be willing or obliged to sweat and toil longer. His service at the shovel and the hoe is but an apprenticeship of a few years, at the end of which he becomes, in his turn, an employer and consumer, rather than a [laborng] producer.

It is this windfall of labor by the millions, pouring into the North during the last twenty years, that has been the leading agent in the rapid development and great prosperity of that section. It

remained at the North because it was wanted there. It did not come South, because we had it already. The defect of this species of labor is its want of permanency— is the fact that it is not (as to the individual) a life-time service, but a mere apprenticeship of a few years. Virginia contains half a million of life-time laborers, descendants of Ham. doubly decreed to service by the divine edicts pronounced against Adam and Canaan — to service for life, service in perpetuity. Suppose that, by some fell decree every laboring immigrant in the North were suddenly swept from that stiff-necked land, who will estimate the thousand millions of loss that would be instantly inflicted upon all its busy interests? Labor, labor, is the jewel of great price in a nation’s casket.— Labor is the bread and breath of a State.

It is proposed to bind Virginia to a political association that will stampede her labor like a pestilence. It is proposed to chain her to a destiny that at once exiles from her borders the grandest body of productive labor to be found in any State upon the globe. It is proposed, by allying the mother of States to the immigrants of New England, not merely to make her an alien and an enemy to her daughters of the South, but to bereave her of her institution of African labor, a handmaid that was born and was fostered with her, that has attended her from youth to age, and to whose faithful and efficient service she owes all her comeliness and comfort.

To show the productive value of this slave system to Virginia, we have only to contrast the property values of those counties within her borders which have few slaves, with those which have many slaves. There could not be a better exponent of the wealth of each than the taxes levied upon them by the Commonwealth; for, except the inconsiderable stipend which is levied per capita, these taxes are all levied directly in proportion to the values existing in the counties, which values are the product exclusively of the labor operating in those counties. For the purpose of exhibiting this contrast we have coupled together in eight or ten pairs, a county from the non-slaveholding portion of the State and a county from the slaveholding, bringing together such as contain nearly equal numbers of white inhabitants. It will be found that in every one of the cases adduced below, (and we will extend the remark without fear of contradiction that in every case which can be adduced at all.) the amount of taxes paid by the slaveholding county is more than double, often treble, that paid by the county having few or no slaves. In each couple given, the first is a Western, the second an

Eastern county:

Counties Whites. Taxation

Harrison 13,182 \$15,192

Halifax 11,066 51,617

Difference paid by slave labor in Halifax

\$36,425

Randolph 4,793 8,592

Rappahannock 5,018 18,632

Difference paid by slave labor

10,040

Highland 3,800 8,499

King & Queen 3,801 17,997

Difference, &c., &c

9,498

Giles 6,051 9,485

Buckingham 6,041 25,889

Difference, &c., &c

15,884

Ritchie 6,809 8,837

Mecklenburg 6,777 58,751

Difference, &c., &c

27,914

Raleigh 3,291 3,987

Sussex 3,118 14,075

Difference, &c., &c

10,088

Tyler 6,488 7,213

Nelson 6,656 21,197

Difference, &c

14,954

Wise 4,416 3,582

Prince Edward 4,033 25,685

Difference, &c., &c

22,113

Pleasants 2,923 4,618

Nottoway 2,270 18,621

Difference, &c., &c

14,603

Webster 1,552 537

Middlesex 1,866 8,700

Difference, &c., &c

8,163

Tucker 1,396 2,267

Warwick, (half as many.) 3,677

Could there be a more striking illustration of the productive power of slave labor than the foregoing

figures afford? Could there be more conclusive proof of their value to the State, and to every interest in the State? The taxes it pays are but the index of the property it has earned for the taxation to be levied upon. The taxes it pays are but a general fund annually contributed to the Treasury of the Commonwealth, in which every citizen, be he resident upon the Ohio or the Holston, has as direct an interest as the Eastern planter. And yet the submissionists of Virginia propose to fix her in a condition to be abruptly robbed of this labor. Worse than Abolitionists, they are willing to be parricides.

This entry was posted in [Secession](#), [Slavery](#), [Virginia](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

3 Responses to *April 1, 1861: Economics of slavery*



Chris Moore says:

April 4, 2011 at 9:21 am

“But the evil of immigrant labor is, that it is not permanent.” “The humble, industrious immigrant soon grows too well-to-do to be willing or obliged to sweat and toil longer.” Unlike the author of this editorial who apparently has never had to labor “manual labor; dirt digging, soil tilling labor;” for his bread. “Labor, labor, is the jewel of great price in a nation’s casket.—” as long as it’s well controlled by those who hold the capital... and as long as those holding that capital are white Anglo-Saxons.

But of course, this was just as God intended all along, “...the labor decreed against man by the curse of Eden... Virginia contains half a million of life-time laborers, descendants of Ham. doubly decreed to service by the divine edicts pronounced against Adam and Canaan — to service for life, service in perpetuity.” But wait, aren’t we all descendants of Adam? Oh, except for the plantation owner class, I forgot.

Funny how time changes reason. “The Yankee lives upon his wits; but the foreign laborer is a real producer— he works with his own hands, he digs the earth, and he produces food for his own consumption as well as for that of his Yankee taskmaster. Well may the North ascribe its prosperity in a great degree to the immigrant; for that individual becomes a producer from the outset, and not until he accumulates a little capital by his manual industry, does he imitate the Yankee, resort to his wits for a livelihood, and resolve himself into a consumer.” To modern ears, this description would serve as a clear exposition of today’s conservative American thought. The “pulling up by ones own bootstraps” ideal. And yet to the Ante-Bellum conservatives this idea was repugnant.

[Reply](#)



Allen Gathman says:

April 4, 2011 at 2:15 pm

I’m not sure that it was repugnant, but the writer just sees it as unsustainable. Who’s going to do the digging and such if the immigrants keep moving up the economic ladder? The possibility of an expanding economy with continuing immigration seems not to have occurred to him. Nor did the possibility that manual labor would be replaced by mechanization.

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