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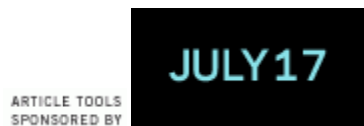
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Think Tank; A Closer Look at Slavery's Many Stages

By Paul Lewis

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For many people today, thinking about slavery in America conjures up the image of bent black backs toiling on enormous cotton plantations patrolled by whip-cracking overseers.

But in "Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America," to be published by Harvard University Press in September, Prof. Ira Berlin of the University of Maryland says the picture is much more varied and complex.

Billed as the first comprehensive account of American slavery, Professor Berlin's book is causing a buzz among scholars. "This is the first book to treat slavery in such a broad perspective covering all 13 colonies, the French and Spanish areas and the links to West Africa," Prof. Eric Foner of Columbia University says. "It shows there were different kinds of slavery at different times."

Indeed, Mr. Berlin depicts the slaves' world as highly diversified. It is a world where the first slaves reach North America already familiar with European ways and languages. It is a world where the North is as enthusiastic about slavery as the South. It is a world where many become artisans and soldiers and where some acquire freedom, property, even slaves of their own.

Mr. Berlin explains how the development of plantation farming -- tobacco around the Chesapeake Bay, rice and indigo in South Carolina and cotton and sugar in Florida and the lower Mississippi -- produced a vastly enlarged slave trade, direct from West Africa.

This ultimately transformed these regions from what Professor Berlin terms "societies with slaves" into even more brutal "slave societies."

Professor Berlin goes back to the beginning of the slave trade, in the early 17th century. The first slaves were primarily Creoles, people of mixed race who had already rubbed shoulders with Europeans in the West Indies or the trading posts of West Africa. They worked alongside white laborers, often acquiring skills and buying their freedom. Anthony Johnson, for example, sold at Jamestown in 1621 as "Antonio a Negro," ended up a prosperous free farmer with a 250-acre Virginia estate.

This pattern lasted longest in the Northern states, where the absence of plantation farming kept the slave population below 50,000 throughout the 18th century.

But a growing labor shortage produced a mini-influx to the North in mid-century. Slave life became harsher. Many slaves spurned Christianity and returned to their African roots. They used their original African names and invented private role-reversal festivals like Negro Election Day, when slaves pretended to elect their black kings, governors and judges.

Although the Northern states freed their slaves after the Revolution, these laws were full of loopholes and slow to take effect. In the South, plantation farming brought an explosion in the slave population. Around the Chesapeake Bay, it rose from fewer than 5,000 in 1680 to more than 800,000 by 1810; in South Carolina and Georgia, from a mere 200 to more than 300,000, and in the lower Mississippi Valley, from none to more than 50,000.

But conditions varied among these slave societies. The danger of Spanish and Indian attack forced South Carolina to recruit slaves into its militia. As plantation owners moved into new towns, they took with them slaves who often set up small businesses, while in the countryside agricultural slaves were allowed to cultivate private gardens and therefore gained a measure of economic independence.

In Florida and the Mississippi Valley, Creoles at first gained considerable freedom, especially under Spanish rule. But a plantation economy requiring many slaves and harsher discipline developed in the 1790's after slave revolts in Haiti created a market for American sugar.

After the United States made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, American planters poured down the Mississippi Valley to create another slave society ruled by King Cotton. Instead of the the stable, antebellum slave society depicted in literature and film, Professor Berlin argues, it was a time of upheaval marked by revolts inspired by the French and American Revolutions, by an enormous migration of slaves from the eastern states.

Mr. Berlin's new picture of early slave society may end up bringing revisions in the concept of the later slave culture. As Stephen Hahan, a historian of slavery at the

University of California at San Diego, put it: "The traditional picture of the Old South as a tranquil gentocracy may need revision."

Photo: An undated work by Howard Pyle depicts the selling of slaves in New York (Culver Pictures)