The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion

by

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In the forefront of that group of issues which, for more than a decade before the secession of the cotton states, kept the northern and southern sections of the United States in irritating controversy and a growing sense of enmity, was the question whether the federal government should permit and protect the expansion of slavery into the western territories. If it be granted that this was not at all times the foremost cause of controversy between the sections, it must be acknowledged that no other question was the subject of such continuous and widespread interest nor of such acrimonious debate. While behind it lay the the larger question whether slavery should be allowed to persist permanently where it already existed, it was this immediate problem of the extension of the institution that gave excitement to the political contests of 1843 to 1845, of 1847 to 1851, and of 1854 to 1860. It was upon this particular issue that a new and powerful sectional party appeared in 1854, that the majority of the Secessionists of the cotton states predicated their action in 1860 and 1861, and it was upon this also that President-elect Lincoln forced the defeat of the compromise measures in the winter of 1860-61. It seems safe to say that had this question been eliminated or settled amicably, there would have been no secession and no Civil War.

The essential points in the controversy over slavery expansion are well known; but in order to focus attention upon the phase of the question here under discussion, it is desirable to cite them again. As stated by the supporters of the Wilmot Proviso and the opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, it was the question whether the plantation system of agriculture and negro slave labor should be allowed to take possession of the vast western plains, shut out the white home-owning small farmer and the white free laborer, and, by the creation of new slave states, no far increase the political strength of "slave power" that it would be able to dominate the whole nation in its own interest. As stated by the pro-slavery men, it was the question whether an important and essential southern interest, guaranteed by the federal compact, should be stigmatized by the general government itself and excluded from the territories owned in common by all the states, with the inevitable consequence of so weakening the the southern people politically that they would soon no longer be able to defend themselves against hostile and ruinous legislation. This brief explanation does not cover all the ground, but it may suffice for the present purpose. Each party to the controversy considered itself on the defensive and, therefore, to each the issue seemed of vital importance. Neither was willing to surrender anything. Disregarding the stock arguments - constitutional, economic, social, and what not - advanced be either group, let us examine afresh the real problem involved. Would slavery, if legally permitted to do so, have taken possession of the territories or of any considerable portion of them? There is no question but that our own generation must, if the fears of the anti-expansionists were well founded, sympathize with the opposition to slavery extension. But were their apprehensions well-founded? A number of eminent historians, while admitting that slavery could not have flourished on the high arid lands of New Mexico, have either ignored the question with respect to Kansas or have tacitly seemed to assume that the upper plains region would have become a slave section but for the uprising of the people of the free states. They have pointed to various projects for annexations or protectorates to the south of the United States as further evidence of a dangerous program for the extension of slave power. They have applauded the property of Lincoln, in his "house divided" speech, that slavery, if not arrested, would extend over the whole country, North as well as South. Despite a lingering disinclination to question Lincoln's infallibility, probably few students of that period today would fully subscribe to that belief. Indeed, many of them have already expressed their disbelief; but so far as I am aware the subject has never been examined comprehensively and the results set down. It is time that such an examination should be made; and, since those more competent have not attempted it, I shall endeavor in this paper to direct attention to the question, even if I throw little new light upon it.

The causes of the expansion of slavery westward from the South Atlantic coast are now well understood. The industrial revolution and the opening of world markets had continually increased the consumption and demand for raw cotton, while the abundance of fertile and cheap cotton lands in the Gulf States had steadily lured cotton farmers and planters westward. Where large-scale production was possible, the enormous demand for a steady supply of labor had made the use of slaves inevitable, for a sufficient supply of free labor was unprocurable on the frontier. Within one generation, the cotton-growing slave belt had swept across the Gulf region from eastern Georgia to Texas. A parallel movement had carried slaves, though in smaller ratio to whites, into the tobacco and hemp fields of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri. The most powerful factor in the westward movement of slavery was cotton, for the land available for other staples - sugar, hemp, tobacco - was limited, while slave labor was not usually profitable in growing grain. This expansion of the institution was in response to economic stimuli; it had been inspired by no political program nor by any ulterior political purpose. It requires but little acquaintance with the strongly individualistic and unregimented society of that day to see that it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to carry out such an extensive program; nor is there any evidence that such a program existed. There was incentive enough in the desire of the individual slaveowner for the greater profits which he expected in new lands. The movement would go on as far as suitable cotton lands were to be found or as long as there was a reasonable expectation of profit from slave labor, provided, of course, that no political barrier was encountered. The astonishing rapidity of the advance of the southern frontier prior to 1840 had alarmed the opponents of slavery, who feared that the institution would extend indefinitely into the West. But by 1849-50, when the contest over the principle of the Wilmot Proviso was at its height, the western limits of the cotton-growing region were already approximated; and by the time the new Republican party was formed to check the further expansion of slavery, the westward march of the cotton plantation was evidently slowing down. The northern frontier of cotton production west of the Mississippi had already been established at about the northern line of Arkansas. Only a negligible amount of the staple was being grown in Missouri. West of Arkansas a little cotton was cultivated by the slave holding, civilized Indians; but until the Indian territory should be opened generally to white settlement - a development of which there was no immediate prospect - it could not become a slaveholding region of any importance. The only possibility of a further extension of the cotton belt was in Texas. In that state alone was the frontier line of cotton and slavery still advancing.

In considering the possibilities of the further extension of slavery, then, it is necessary to examine the situation in Texas in the eighteen-fifties. Though slave had been introduced into Texas by some of Stephen F. Austin's colonists, they were not brought in large numbers until after annexation. Before the Texas Revolution, the attitude of the Mexican government and the difficulty of marketing the products of slave labor had checked their introduction; while during the period of the Republic, the uncertainty as to the future of the country, the heavy tariff laid upon Texas cotton by the United States, which in the absence of a direct trade with Europe was virtually the only market for Texas cotton, and the low price of cotton after 1839, had been sufficient in general to restrain the cotton planter from emigrating to the new country. Annexation to the United States and the successful termination of the war with Mexico removed most of these impediments. Thereafter there was no tariff to pay; slave property was safe; land agents offered an abundance of cheap rich lands near enough to the coast and to navigable rivers to permit ready exportation; and the price of cotton was again at a profitable figure. Planters with their slaves poured into the new state in increasing numbers. They settled along the northeastern border, where they had an outlet by way of the Red River, or in the east and southeast along the rivers which flowed into the Gulf. But these rivers were not navigable very far from the coast, and the planter who went far into the interior found difficulty in getting his cotton to market. He must either wait upon a rise in the river and depend upon occasional small steamers or the risky method of floating his crop down on rafts; or he must haul it in during the wet winter season along nearly impassible pioneer roads and across unbridged streams to Houston or Shreveport, or some other far-off market. The larger his crop, the more time, difficulty, and expense of getting it to market.

Obviously, there was a geographic limit beyond which, under such conditions, the growth of large crops of cotton was unprofitable. Therefore, in the early fifties, the cotton plantations tended to cluster in the river countries in the eastern and southern parts of the state. While the small farmers and stockmen pushed steadily out into the central section of Texas, driving the Indians before them, the cotton plantations and the mass of slaves lagged far behind. The up-country settlers grew their little crops of grain on some of the finest cotton lands of the world; and they sold their surplus to immigrants and to army posts. Few negroes were to be found on these upland farms, both because the prices demanded for slaves were too high for the farmers to but them, and because the seasonal character of labor in grain growing rendered the use of slaves unprofitable. Though negro mechanics were in demand and were hired at high wages, the field hand had to be employed fairly steadily throughout the year if his labor was to show a profit. Negroes were even less useful in handling range stock than in farming and were rarely used for that purpose. Therefore, the extension of the cotton plantation into the interior of Texas had to wait upon the development of a cheaper and more efficient means of transportation. As all attempts to improve the navigation of the shallow, snag-filled rivers failed, it became more and more evident that the only solution of the problem of the interior lay in the building of railroads. Throughout the eighteen-fifties, and indeed for two decades after the war, there was a feverish demand for railroads in all parts of the state. The newspapers of the period were full of projects and promises, and scores of railroad companies were organized or promoted. But capital was lacking and the roads were slow in building. Not a single railroad had reached the fertile black-land belt of central Texas by 1860. There can hardly be any question that the cotton plantations with their working forces of slaves would have followed the railroads westward until they reached the black-land prairies of central Texas or the semi-arid plains which cover the western half of the state. But would they have followed on into the prairies and the plains?

It is important to recall that eastern Texas, like the older South Atlantic and Gulf cotton region, is a wooded country, where the essential problem of enclosing fields was easily solved by the rail fence. But in the black-land prairies there was no fencing material, except for a little wood along the creeks; and during the fifties the small fields of the farmers were along these streams. The prairies, generally, were not enclosed and put under the plow until after the introduction of barbed wire in the late seventies. Unless the planter had resorted to the expense of shipping rails from eastern Texas, there was no way in which he could have made more use of the prairie lands than the small farmers did. Here, then, in the central black-land prairies, was a temporary barrier to the westward movement of the slave plantation. Beyond it was another barrier that would have been permanently impassable.

Running north and south, just west of the black-land belt, and almost in the geographical center of the state, is a hilly, wooded strip of varying width known as the East and West Cross Timbers, which is prolonged to the south and southwest by the Edwards Plateau. West of the Cross Timbers begins the semi-arid plain which rises to the high, flat table-land of the Staked Plains, or Llano Estaendo, in the extreme west and northwest. Except for a few small cattle ranches, there were almost no settlements in this plains country before 1860; and despite the heavy immigration into Texas after the Civil War, it was not until the eighties that farmers began to penetrate this section.

The history of the agricultural development of the Texas plains region since 1880 affords abundant evidence that it would never have been suitable for plantation slave labor. Let us turn, for a moment, to this later period. The Texas and Pacific Railroad, completed by 1882 and followed by the building of other roads into and across the plains, afforded transportation; and the introduction of barbed wire solved the fencing problems. State and railroad lands were offered the settlers a low prices. Farmers began moving into the eastern plains about 1880, but they were driven back again and again by droughts. It took more than twenty years of experimentation and adaptation with wind mills, dry-farming, and new drought-resisting feed crops for the cotton farmer to conquer the plains. There is little reason to believe that the conquest could have been effected earlier; there is even less basis for belief that the region would ever have been filled with plantations and slaves. For reasons which will be advanced later, it is likely that the institution of slavery would have declined toward extinction in the Old South before the cotton conquest of the plains could have been accomplished, even had there been no Civil War. But if the institution had remained in full vigor elsewhere, it would have been almost impossible to establish the plantation system in this semi-arid section where, in the experimental period, complete losses of crops were so frequent. With so much of his capital tied up in unremunerative laborers whom he must feed and clothe, it is hard to see how any planter could have stayed in that country. Moreover, in the later period the use of improved machinery, especially adapted to the plains, would have made slave labor unnecessary and unbearably expensive. The character of the soil and the infrequency of rainfall have enabled the western cotton farmer, since 1900, with the use of this improved machinery to cultivate a far larger acreage in cotton, and other crops as well, than was possible in the older South or in eastern Texas. The result has been the appearance of a high peak in the demand for labor in western Texas in the cotton-picking season. This has called for transient or seasonal labor as in the grain fields -- a situation that could not be met by the plantation system of slave labor. During the last twenty-five years this section has become populous and prosperous; but the beginning of its success as a cotton-growing region came fifty years after the Republican party was organized to stop the westward advance of the "cotton barons" and their slaves. It may or may not have any significance that the negro has moved but little farther west in Texas than he was in 1860 -- he is still a rarity in the plains country -- although it may be presumed that his labor has been cheaper in freedom than under slavery.

But let us look for a moment at the southwestern border of Texas. In 1860 slavery had stopped more than one hundred and fifty miles short of the Rio Grande. One obvious explanation of this fact is that the slaveowner feared to get too close to the boundary lest his bondmen escape into Mexico. There is no doubt that this fear existed, and that slaves occasionally made their way into that country. But it is worth noting that very little cotton was grown then or is yet grown on that border of Texas, except in the lower valley around Brownsville and along the coast about Corpus Christi. Other crops have proved better adapted to the soil and climate and have paid better. More significant still is the fact that very few negroes are found there today, for Mexican labor is cheaper than negro labor now, as it was in the eighteen-fifties. During the decade before secession, Mexican labor was used exclusively south of the Nueces River. After emancipation there was still no movement of negroes into the region where Mexican labor was employed. The disturbances which began in Mexico in 1910 have sent floods of Mexicans across the Rio Grande to labor in the fruit and truck farms of the valley and the cotton fields of south Texas. An interesting result is that the Mexican has steadily pushed the negro out of south Texas and to a considerable degree out of south-central Texas. Wherever the two have come into competition either on the farms or as day laborers in the towns, the Mexican has won. This would seem to show that there was little chance for the institution of African slavery to make headway in the direction of Mexico.

There was another situation which checked the extension of slavery into southwestern Texas. A large area of the most fertile lands had been settled by German immigrants, who had begun coming into that district in the late eighteen -forties. Not only were the Germans opposed to slavery; they were too poor to purchase slaves. They needed labor, as all pioneers do; but their needs were met by the steady inflow of new German immigrants, whose habit it was to hire themselves out until they were able to buy small farms for themselves. The system of agriculture of these industrious and frugal people had no place for the African, whether slave or free. Even today one sees few negroes among the original and typical German settlements. In 1860, east and southeast of San Antonio, these Germans formed a barrier across the front of the slaveholders.

Before turning to the possibilities of slavery extension in other sections, let us consider another question that may be raised by those who still feel that possibly some political advantage was to be gained for the pro-slavery cause in Texas. It had been provided in the joint resolution for the annexation of Texas, in 1845, that as many as four additional states could be formed from the new state, with the consent of Texas, and that such states should be formed from the territory "south of the line of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes north latitude, commonly known as the Missouri compromise line, shall be admitted into the Union with or without slavery, as the people of each state asking admission may desire." It is frequently said that this division, if made, would have had the effect, politically, of an extension of the slavery system through the addition of at least two and possibly eight pro-slavery votes for the South in the United States Senate. Though there was some suggestion of such a division from time to time in other parts of the South before 1860 - and sometimes in the North - the sentiment for it in Texas was negligible and it was never seriously contemplated by any considerable group. A strong state pride, always characteristic of the Texans, was against division. There was some sectional feeling between the east and the west, dating from the days of the Republic; and the only agitation of the subject before the war was in 1850 and 1851 when discontent was expressed in eastern Texas over the selection of Austin as the permanent location of the capital. The agitation was frowned upon by the pro-slavery leaders on the ground that separation would result in the creation of a free state in western Texas, which was then overwhelmingly non-slaveholding.

By the provisions of the Compromise of 1850, New Mexico, Utah, and the other territories acquired from Mexico were legally open to slavery. In view of well-known facts, it may hardly seem worth while to discuss the question whether slavery would ever have taken possession of that vast region; but perhaps some of those facts should be set down. The real western frontier of the cotton belt is still in Texas; for though cotton is grown in small quantities in New Mexico, Arizona, and California, in none of these states is the entire yield equal to that of certain single counties in Texas. In none is negro labor used to any appreciable extent, if at all. In New Mexico and Arizona, Mexican labor is is cheaper than negro labor, as has been the case ever since the acquisition of the region from Mexico. It was well understood by sensible men, North and South, in 1850 that soil, climate, and native labor would form a perpetual bar to slavery in the vast territory then called New Mexico. Possibly southern California could have sustained slavery, but California had already decided that question for itself, and there was no remote probability that the decision would ever be reversed. As to New Mexico, the census of 1860, ten years after the territory had been thrown open to slavery, showed not a single slave; and this was true of both Colorado and Nevada. Utah, alone of all these territories, was credited with any slaves at all. Surely these results for the ten years when, it is alleged, the slave power was doing its utmost to extend its system into the West, ought to have confuted those who had called down frenzied curses upon the head of Daniel Webster for his Seventh-of March speech.

At the very time when slavery was reaching its natural and impassible frontiers in Texas, there arose the fateful excitement over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, or rather over the clause which abrogated the Missouri Compromise and left the determination of the status of the status of slavery in the two territories to their own settlers. Every student of American history knows of the explosion produced in the North by the "Appeal of the Independent Democrats in Congress to the People of the United States," written and circulated by Senator Chase and other members of Congress. This fulmination predicted that the passage of the bill would result in debarring free home-seeking immigrants and laborers from a vast region larger, excluding California, than all the free states, and in converting it into a dreary waste filled with plantations and slaves. It was a remarkably skillful maneuver and it set the North, particularly the Northwest, on fire. But, in all candor, what of the truth of the prophecy? Can anyone who examines the matter objectively today say that there was any probability that slavery as an institution would ever have taken possession of either Kansas or Nebraska? Certainly cotton could not have been grown in either, for it was not grown in the adjacent part of Missouri. Hemp, and possibly tobacco, might have been grown in a limited portion of eastern Kansas along the Missouri and the lower Kansas rivers; and if no obstacle had been present, undoubtedly a few negroes would have been taken into eastern Kansas. But the infiltration of slaves would have been a slow process.

Apparently, there was no expectation, even on the part of the pro-slavery men, that slavery would go into Nebraska. Only a small fraction of the territory was suited to any crops that could be grown with profit by slave labor, and by far the greater population of Kansas - even of the eastern half that was available for immediate settlement - would have been occupied in a short time, as it was in fact, by a predominantly non-slaveholding and free-soil population. To say that the individual slaveowner would disregard his own economic interest and carry valuable property where it would entail loss merely for the sake of a doubtful political advantage seems a palpable absurdity. Indeed, competent students who have examined this subject have shown that the chief interest of the pro-slavery Missourians in seeking to control the organization of the territorial government was not so much in taking slaves into Kansas as in making sure that no free-soil territory should be organized on their border to endanger their property in western Missouri. They lost in the end, as they were bound to lose. The census of 1860 showed two slaves in Kansas and fifteen in Nebraska. In short, there is good reason to believe that had Douglas' bill passed Congress without protest, and had it been sustained by the people of the free states, slavery could not have taken root in Kansas if the decision were left to the people of the territory itself.

The fierce contest which accompanied and followed the passage of Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Bill is one of the sad ironies of history. Northern and southern politicians and agitators, backed by excited constituents, threw fuel into the flames of sectional antagonism until the country blazed into a civil war that was the greatest tragedy of a nation. There is no need here to analyze the arguments, constitutional or otherwise, that were employed. Each party to the controversy seemed obsessed by the fear that its own preservation was at stake. The northern anti-slavery men held that a legal sanction of slavery in the territories would result in the extension of the institution and the domination of the free North by slave power; prospective immigrants in particular feared that they would never be able to get homes in the West. Their fears were groundless; but in their excited state of mind they could neither see the facts clearly nor consider them calmly. The slaveholding Southerners, along with other thousands of Southerners who never owned slaves, believed that a victory in Kansas for the anti-slavery forces would not only weaken Southern defense - for they well knew that the South was on the defensive - but would encourage further attacks until the economic life of the South and "white civilization" were destroyed. Though many of them doubted whether slavery would ever take permanent root in Kansas, they feared to yield a legal precedent which could later be used against them. And so they demanded a right which they could not actively use - the legal right to carry slaves where few would or could be taken. The one side fought rancorously for what it was bound to get without fighting; the other, with equal rancor, contended for what in the nature of things it could never use.

No survey of the possibilities for the expansion of slavery would be complete without giving some consideration to another aspect of the subject - the various proposals for the acquisition of Cuba and Nicaragua, for a protectorate over Mexico, and for the reopening of the African Slave trade. These matters can be dealt with briefly, for today the facts are fairly well understood.

The movement for the annexation of Cuba was one of mixed motives. There was the traditional American dislike of Spanish colonial rule, strengthened by a natural sympathy for the Cubans, who were believed to wish independence. There was wide-spread irritation over the difficulty of obtaining from the Spanish government and redress for indignities perpetuated upon American vessels in Cuban ports and the indifference of Spain to claims for losses sustained by American citizens. Many Americans believed that only the acquisition of the island would terminate our perennial diplomatic troubles with Spain. There was the ever-present desire for territorial expansion, which was by no means peculiar to any section of the country. This ambition was reinforced by an extraordinary confidence in the superiority of American political institutions and the blessings which they would confer upon the annexed peoples. There was also the fear on the part of southern men that British pressure upon Spain would result in the abolition of slavery in Cuba and in some way endanger the institution of slavery in the United States; and this fear was heightened by the knowledge that both Great Britain and France were hostile to American acquisition of the island. A powerful incentive in New Orleans, the hotbed of the filibustering movements, and also in New York, was the hope for a lucrative trade with the island after annexation. There is evidence that some of the planters in the newer cotton belt hoped to get a supply of cheaper slaves from Cuba where the prices were about half what they were in the southern states. Finally, there was the desperate hope of the extreme southern-rights group that, by the admission of Cuba to the Union as a slave state, increased political strength would be added to the defenses of the South.

All these motives were so mixed that it is impossible to assign to each its relative weight. The southern demand for annexation, because of the frankness of the pro-slavery leaders who advocated it and because it was made the point of attack by the anti-slavery group, has been magnified out of its true proportion. Even in the South there was nothing like general approval, by responsible men, of the filibustering enterprises of Lopez and Quitman, for many of those pro-slavery leaders who admitted a desire for the island repudiated the suggestion of forcibly seizing it from Spain. Although both Presidents Pierce and Buchanan pressed offers of purchase upon Spain - or sought to do so - they were unwilling to go further when their offers were coldly rejected. In view of the action of the government in smothering Quitman's filibustering effort in 1854, the general political situation in the United States, and the attitude of Great Britain and France, it must be said that the prospect of acquiring Cuba was, at best, remote.

As to Nicaragua and the frequently asserted dictum that William Walker was but the agent of the slavery expansionists, it is now well enough known that Walker's enterprise was entirely his own and that he had no intention whatever, if successful, of turning over his private conquest to the United States, though he endeavored to use the more fanatical pro-slavery men of the South to further his own designs. In fact, until he broke with Commodore Vanderbilt, he had much closer connection with powerful financial interests in New York than he had with the Southerners. Had Walker succeeded, those pro-slavery expansionists who had applauded him would most certainly have been sorely disappointed in him. There seems to have been little basis for the fear that Nicaragua would ever have become a field for slavery expansion, or that it could have strengthened in any way the institution of slavery in the southern states. Does the history of the subsequent advance of the United States into the southern islands and Central America induce ironical reflection upon the controversies of the eighteen-fifties?

The filibustering projects against Mexico in the decade of the fifties were of no importance. They were but the feeble continuation of those directed early in century against the northern provinces of Spain. There is little evidence that any responsible southern leaders cherished the design of seizing additional territory from Mexico for the extension of slavery. They knew too well that it was futile to expect that slaves could be used in the high table-lands or even in the low country where cheaper native labor was already plentiful. It is true that in 1858 Senator Sam Houston of Texas introduced in the Senate a resolution for a protectorate over Mexico. But Houston never showed any interest in the expansion of slavery; and his avowed purpose was to restore peace in Mexico, then distracted by revolutions; to protect the border of the United States; and to enable the Mexican government to pay its debts and satisfy its foreign creditors. His proposal was rejected in the Senate. It was hardly a wise one, but it had nothing to do with slavery. Later in the same year, President Buchanan recommended to Congress the establishment of a temporary protectorate over the northern provinces of Mexico for the security of the American border; but it is difficult to read into this suggestion any purpose to expand slavery. Not even a permanent protectorate or annexation could have effected an appreciable expansion of the institution.

The agitation for the re-opening of the African slave trade is an interesting episode. Its proponents were a small group of extremists, mostly Secessionists, whose ostensible object was to cheapen the cost of labor for the small farmer who was too poor to pay the high prices for slaves that prevailed in the fifties. Another argument for re-opening the trade was that cheaper slave labor would enable the institution to extend its frontiers into regions where it was too expensive under existing conditions. Finally, the proponents of the movement insisted that unless the cost of slaves declined, the northern tier of slave states would be drained of their negroes until they themselves became free states, thus imperiling the security of the cotton states. There is some reason to suspect that their leaders designed to stir up the anti-slavery element in the North to greater hostility and to renewed attacks in the hope that the South would be driven into secession, which was the ultimate goal of this faction. These agitators were never able to commit a single state to the project, for not only did the border states condemn it but the majority of the people of the Gulf states also. Even Robert Barnwell Rhett, who was at first inclined to support the program, turned against it because he saw that it was dividing the state-rights faction and weakening the cause of southern unity. This in itself seems highly significant of the southern attitude.

If the conclusions that have been set forth are sound, by 1860 the institution of slavery had virtually reached its natural frontiers in the west. Beyond Texas and Missouri the way was closed. There was no reasonable ground for expectation that new lands could be acquired south of the Unite States into which slaves might be taken. There was, in brief, no further place for it to go. In the cold facts of the situation, there was no longer any basis for excited sectional controversy over slavery extension; but the public mind had so long been concerned with the debate that it could not see that the issue had ceased to have validity. In the existing state of the popular mind, therefore, there was still abundant opportunity for the politician to work to his own ends, to play upon prejudice and passion and fear. Blind leaders of the blind! Sowers of the wind, not seeing how near was the approaching harvest of the whirlwind!

Perhaps this paper should end at this point; but it may be useful to push the inquiry a little farther. If slavery could gain no more political territory, would it be able to hold what it had? Were there not clear indications that its area would soon begin to contract? Were there not even some evidences that a new set of conditions were arising within the South itself which would disintegrate the institution? Here, it must be confessed, one enters the field of speculation, which is always dangerous ground for the historian. But there were certain factors in the situation which can be clearly discerned, and it may serve some purpose to indicate them.

Reference has already been made to the increasingly high prices of slaves in the southwestern states throughout the eighteen-fifties. This price-boom was due in part to good prices for cotton; but though there had always previously been a fairly close correlation between cotton and slave prices, the peculiarity of this situation was that slave prices increased much faster than cotton prices from 1850 to the end of 1860. Probably the explanation lies in the abundance of cheap and fertile cotton lands that were available for planting in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. Cheap lands enabled the planter to expand his plantation and to invest a relatively larger amount of his capital in slaves, and the continued good prices for cotton encouraged this expansion. These good prices for slaves were felt all the way back to the oldest slave states, where slave labor was less profitable, and had the effect of drawing away planters and slaves from Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Missouri to the new Southwest. This movement, to be sure, had been going on for several decades, but now the migration from the old border states was causing alarm among the pro-slavery men. Delaware was only nominally a slave state; Maryland's slave population was diminishing steadily. The ration of slaves to whites was declining year by year in Virginia, Kentucky, and even Missouri. The industrial revolution was reaching into these three states, and promised within less than another generation to reduce the economic interest in planting and slaveholding, as already in Maryland, to very small proportions.

The pro-slavery leaders in Virginia and Maryland endeavored to arrest this change by improving the condition of the planter. They renewed their efforts for a direct trade with Europe, and further stimulated interest in agricultural reforms. As already seen, the proponents of the revival of the African slave trade argued that cheaper slave labor in the lower South was necessary to prevent the border states from ultimately becoming free-soil. Though agricultural reform made headway, the other remedies failed to materialize; and the slow but constant transformation of the Atlantic border region proceeded. The greatest impediments were in the reluctance of the families of the old states, where slavery was strongly patriarchal, to part with their family servants, and in the social prestige which attached to the possession of an ample retinue of servants. It was evident, however, that the exodus would go on until the lure of the Southwest lost its force.

As long as there was an abundance of cheap and fertile cotton lands, as there was in Texas, and the prices of cotton remained good, there would be a heavy demand for labor on the new plantations. As far as fresh lands were concerned, this condition would last for some time, for the supply of lands in Texas alone was enormous. But at the end of the decade, there were unmistakable signs that a sharp decline in cotton prices and planting profits was close at hand. The production of cotton had increased slowly, with some fluctuations, from 1848 to 1857, and the price varied from about ten cents to over thirteen cents a pound on the New York market. But a rapid increase in production began in 1858 and the price declined. The crop of 1860 was twice that of 1850. Probably the increase in production was due in part to the rapid building of railroads throughout the South toward the end of the decade, which brought new lands within reach of markets and increased the cotton acreage; but part of the increase was due to the new fields in Texas. There was every indication of increased production and lower price levels for the future, even if large allowance be made for poor-crop years. There was small chance of reducing the acreage, for the cotton planter could not easily change to another crop. Had not the war intervened, there is every reason to believe that there would have been a continuous overproduction and very low prices throughout the sixties and seventies.

What would have happened then when the new lands of the Southwest had come into full production and the price of cotton had sunk to the point at which it could not be grown with profit on the millions of acres of poorer soils in the older sections? The replenishment of the soil would not have solved the problem for it would only have resulted in the production of more cotton. Even on the better lands the margin of profit would have declined. Prices of slaves must have dropped then, even in the Southwest; importation fro the border states would have fallen off; thousands of slaves would have become not only unprofitable but a heavy burden, the market for them gone. Those who are familiar with the history of cotton farming, cotton prices, and the depletion of the cotton lands since the Civil War will agree that this is no fanciful picture.

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In summary and conclusion: it seems evident that slavery had about reached its zenith by 1860 and must shortly have begun to decline, for the economic forces which had carried it into the region west of the Mississippi had about reached their maximum effectiveness. It could not go forward in any direction and it was losing ground along its northern border. A cumbersome and expensive system, it could show profits only as long as it could find plenty of rich land to cultivate and the world would take the product of its crude labor at a good price. It had reached its limits in both profits and lands. The free farmers in the North who dreaded its further spread had nothing to fear. Even those who wished it destroyed had only to wait a little while - perhaps a generation, probably less. It was summarily destroyed at a frightful cost to the whole country and one third of the nation was impoverished for forty years. One is tempted at this point to reflections upon what has long passed for statesmanship on both sides of that long dead issue. But I have not the heart to indulge them.

As to Nicaragua and the frequently asserted dictum that William Walker was but the agent of the slavery expansionists, it its now well enough known that Walker's enterprise was entirely his own and that he had no intention whatever, if successful, of turning over his private conquest to the United States, though he endeavored to use the more fanatical pro-slavery men of the South to further his own designs. In fact, until he broke with Commodore Vanderbilt, he had much closer connection with powerful financial interests in New York than he had with the Southerners. Had Walker succeeded, those pro-slavery expansionists who had applauded him would most certainly have been sorely disappointed in him. There seems to have been little basis for the fear that Nicaragua would ever have become a field for slavery expansion, or that it could have strengthened in any way the institution of slavery in the southern states. Does the history of the subsequent advance of the United States into the southern islands and Central America induce ironical reflection upon the controversies of the eighteen-fifties?

The filibustering projects against Mexico in the decade of the fifties were of no importance. They were but the feeble continuation of those directed early in the century against the northern provinces of Spain. There is little evidence that any responsible southern leaders cherished the design of seizing additional territory from Mexico for the extension of slavery. They knew too well that it was futile to expect that slaves could be used in the high table-lands or even in the low country were cheaper native labor was already plentiful. It is true that in 1858 Senator Sam Houston of Texas introduced in the Senate a resolution for a protectorate over Mexico. But Houston never showed any interest in the expansion of slavery; and his avowed purpose to protect the border of the United States; and to enable the Mexican government to pay its debts and satisfy its foreign creditors. His proposal was rejected in the Senate. It was hardly a wise one, but it had nothing to do with slavery. Later in the same year, President Buchanan recommended to Congress the establishment of a temporary protectorate over the northern provinces of Mexico for the security of the American border; but it is difficult to read into this suggestion any purpose to expand slavery. Not even a permanent protectorate or annexation could have effected an appreciable expansion to the institution.

The agitation for the re-opening of the African slave trade is an interesting episode. Its proponents were a small group of extremists, mostly Secessionists, whose ostensible object was to cheapen the cost of labor for the small farmer who was too poor to pay the high prices for slaves that prevailed in the fifties. Another argument for re-opening the trade was that cheaper slave labor would enable the institution to extend its frontiers into regions where it was too expensive under existing conditions. Finally, the proponents of the movement insisted that unless the cost of slaves declined, the northern tier of slave states would be drained of their negroes until they themselves became free states, thus imperiling the security of the cotton states. There is some reason to suspect that their leaders designed to stir up the anti-slavery element in the North to greater hostility and to reviewed attacks in the hope that the South would be driven into secession, which was the ultimate goal of this faction. These agitators were never able to commit a single state to the project, for not only did the border states condemn it but the majority of the people of the Gulf states also. Even Robert Barnwell Rhett, who was at first inclined to support the program, turned against it because he saw that is was dividing the state-rights faction and weakening the cause of southern unity. This in itself seems highly significant of the southern attitude.

If the conclusions that have been set forth are sound, by 1860 the institution of slavery had virtually reached its natural frontiers in the west. Beyond Texas and Missouri the way was closed. There was no reasonable ground for expectation that new lands could be acquired south of the United States into which slaves might be taken. There was, in brief, no further place for it to go. In the cold facts of the situation, there was no longer any basis for excited sectional controversy over slavery extension; but the public mind had so long been concerned with the debate that it could no see that the issue had ceased to have validity. In the existing state of the popular mind, therefore, there was still abundant opportunity for the politician to work to his own ends, to play upon prejudice and passion and fear. Blind leaders of the blind! Sowers of the wind, not seeing how near was the approaching harvest of the whirlwind!

Perhaps this paper should end at this point; but it may be useful to push the inquiry a little farther. If slavery could gain no more political territory, would it be able to hold what it had? Were there not clear indications that its area would soon begin to contract? Were there not even some evidences that a new set of conditions were arising within the South itself which would disintegrate the institution? Here, it must be confessed, one enters the field of speculation, which is always dangerous ground for the historian. But there were certain factors in the situation which can be clearly discerned, and it may serve some purpose to indicate them. Reference has already been made to the increasingly high prices of slaves in the southwestern states throughout the eighteen-fifties. This price-boom was due in part to good prices for cotton; but though there had always previously been a fairly close correlation between cotton and slave prices, the peculiarity of this situation was that slave prices increased much faster than cotton prices from 1850 to the end of 1860. Probably the ex-plantation lies in the abundance of cheap and fertile cotton lands that were available for planting in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. Cheap lands enabled the planter to expand his plantation and to invest a relatively larger amount of his capital in slaves, and the continued good prices for cotton encouraged this expansion. These good prices for slaves were felt all the way back to the oldest slave states, where slave labor was less profitable, and had the effect of drawing away planters and slaves from Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Missouri to the new Southwest. This movement, to be sure, had been going on for several decades, but now the migration from the old border states was causing alarm among the pro-slavery men. Delaware was only nominally a slave state; Maryland's slave population was diminishing steadily. The ration of slaves to whites was declining year by year in Virginia, Kentucky, and even in Missouri. The industrial revolution was reaching into these three states, and promised within less than another generation to reduce the economic interest in planting and slaveholding, as already in Maryland, to very small proportions.

The pro-slavery leaders in Virginia and Maryland endeavored to arrest this change by improving the condition of the planter. They renewed their efforts for a direct trade with Europe, and further stimulated interest in agricultural reforms. As already seen, the proponents of the revival of the African slave trade argued that cheaper slave labor in the lower South was necessary to prevent the border states from ultimately becoming free-soil. Though agricultural reform made headway, the other remedies failed to materialize; and the slow but constant transformation of the Atlantic border region proceeded. The greatest impediments were in the reluctance of the families of the old states, where slavery was strongly patriarchal, to part with their family servants, and in the social prestige which attached to the possession of an ample retinue of servants. It was evident, however, that the exodus would go on until the lure of the Southwest lost its force.

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Source: Ramsdell, Charles W. "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion," Mississippi Valley Historical Review(March, 1929), 151-171