4. Slavery Defended

Not many whites in the antebellum South shared Jefferson's reservations about slavery. Most whites accepted slavery and defended it. Those defenses increased after 1800, becoming especially intense during sectional crises like those of the 1830s and 1850s. Once slavery had been a "necessary evil," Now it became a "positive good."

William Harper, lawyer, judge, U.S. senator, and leader in the South Carolina House of Representatives, argued that slavery benefited slaves. James Henry Hammond, wealthy planter and politician from South Carolina, claimed that society was naturally divided into two classes: those who are responsible for "progress, civilization, and refinement" and those who "do the menial duties... perform the drudgery of life." George Fitzhugh, Virginia lawyer, authored two vigorous defenses of the southern way of life: Sociology of the South; or, Failure of Free Society (1854) and Cannibals All or Slaves Without Masters (1857). He not only defended slavery as it was practiced in the antebellum South, he claimed that it was better and more humane than the free labor system of the North. Thornton Stringfellow, a Baptist clergyman from Virginia, defended slavery on religious grounds in Scriptural and Statistical Views of Slavery in Favor of Slavery (1856). He found support in the Bible that "God [had] ordained slavery." He also claimed that the slaves enjoyed greater prosperity and better social conditions than the non-slave states did.

Of course, some southern whites objected to slavery as an institution. But by the 1850s their numbers had dwindled, and they were neither an effective nor a welcome voice in the South.

Source: George Fitzhugh, Cannibals All or, Slaves Without Masters (Richmond, Va.: A. Morris, 1857), pp. 17-19, 223-224.

Probably, you are a lawyer, a merchant, or a doctor, who has made by your business fifty thousand dollars, and resided to live on your capital. ... But you, my virtuous, respectable reader, exact three thousand dollars per annum from white labor (for your income is the product of white labor) and make not one cent of return in any form. You retain your capital, and never labor, and yet live in luxury on the labor of others. Capital commands labor, as the master does the slave. Neither pays for labor, but the master permits the slave to retain a larger allowance from the proceeds of his own labor, and hence "free labor is cheaper than slave labor." You, wish the command over labor which your capital gives you, are a slave owner—a master, without the obligations of a master. They who work for you, who create your income, are slaves, without the rights of slaves. Slaves without a master! While you were engaged in amassing your capital, in seeking to become independent, you were in the White Slave Trade. To become independent is to be able to make other people support you, without being obliged to labor for them. Now, what man in society is not seeking to attain this situation? He who attains it is a slave owner, in the worst sense. He who in pursuit of it is engaged in the slave trade. You, reader, being to the one or other class. The men without property, in free society, are theoretically in a worse condition than slaves. ... The capitalists, in free society, live in ten times the luxury and show that Southern masters do, because the slaves to capital work harder and cost less than negro slaves.

The negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world. The children and the aged and infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessities of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by corvée nor labor. The women do little hard work, and are protected from the despotism of their husbands by their masters. The negro men and stout boys work, on the average, in good weather, not more than nine hours a day. The balance of their time is spent in perfect abdun. Besides, they have their Sabbaths and holidays. White men, with so much of license and liberty, would die of ennui; but negroes luxuriate in corporeal and mental repose. With their faces upturned to the sun, they can sleep at any hour; and quiet sleep is the greatest of human enjoyments. "Blessed be the man who invented sleep." (This happens in itself—and results from contentment with the present, and confi-
dent assurance of the future. We do not know whether free laborers ever sleep. They are too poor, too cold, and they die early. But the wealthy and watchful capitalist is devising means to ensure and exploit them. The free laborer must work or starve. He is more of a slave than the negro, because he works longer and harder for less allowance than the slave, and has no holiday, because the cares of life with him begin when his labors end. He has no liberty, and not a single right. We know, 'tis often said, air and water are common property, which all have equal right to partake and enjoy; but this is utterly false. The appropriation of the lands carries with it the appropriation of all on or above the lands, sene ad usum, and ad referendum. "Even to
heaven or to hell." A man cannot breathe the air without a place to breathe it from, and all places are appropriated. All water is private property "to the middle of the stream," except the ocean, and that is not fit to drink. . . .

Set your uncalled free laborers actually free, by giving them enough property or capital to live on, and then call on us at the South to free our negroes. At present, you Abolitionists know our negro slaves are much the freer of the two; and it would be a great advance toward freeing your laborers, to give them guardians, bound, like our masters, to take care of them, and entitled, in consideration thereof, to the proceeds of their labor.

Questions

1. How do these defenders of slavery differ from Jefferson in their attitudes toward slavery?
2. Is it possible that this change reflected sectional tension and a growing distance from the American Revolution and its (not always consistently applied) commitment to liberty and equality? Why or why not?
3. What do you think of the hierarchical assumptions these arguments contain?
4. What do you think of Finkbeiner's description of free labor? Is it relevant in today's world?
5. Shareholders claimed they had paternalistic feelings for their slaves. Is there any validity to their claims?
6. Did those claims rest on the assumption that blacks were children all their lives? Is that assumption valid? Why or why not?