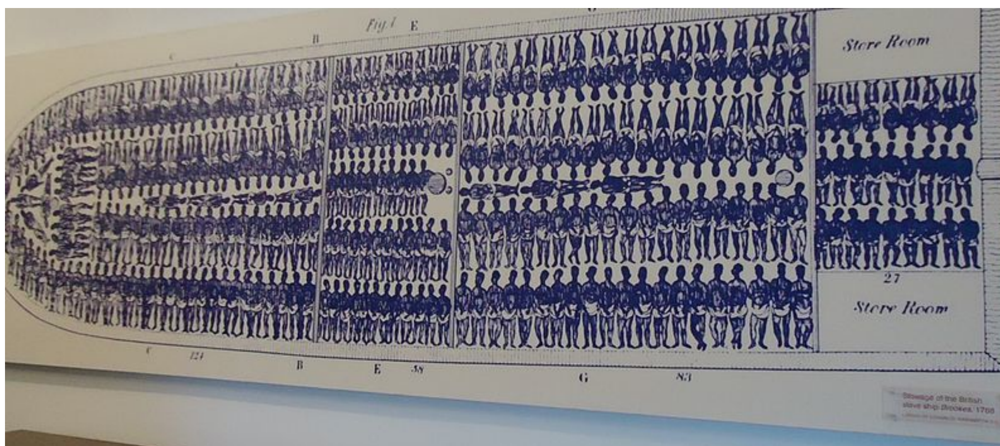
THE Rogue THEATRE

A SHORT HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES

by Jerry James



In August 1619, the English ship *White Lion* arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, then the only British colony in North America. Its cargo was "20 and odd Negroes" pirated from the Portuguese vessel *Sao Joao Bautista*.

Thus began the Atlantic slave trade. It would not end until 400,000 Africans had been so sold and enslaved.

Portugal was Europe's first major seafaring nation, and as it made its way down the African Gold Coast in the early 15th century, it found "trade more lucrative than pillage," as Ira Berlin put it. Trade, that is, in human beings. Slavery as a result of warfare had long been common in sub-Saharan Africa, but it took the Portuguese to monetize it internationally.

So well did they succeed in this that during most of the 17th century the Portuguese slave-trading headquarters at Elmina (in present-day Ghana) was larger than Charleston, the primary slave port of the British Colonies.

The newly enslaved would arrive at the coast in coffles, yoked together. In the later years of the Triangle Trade—West Indian molasses to Boston rum to African slaves—prices were set at 115 gallons for a male, 95 for a female.

Those purchased were branded and loaded aboard. Captains would attempt to fill their quota of about 300 quickly, because keeping human cargo in port cost money. Setting sail began the Middle Passage, a journey of unparalleled brutality and dehumization.

Mindful of mutinies, the slavers brought only about a quarter of the enslaved on deck at a time (twice a day, with the men chained) for meals and exercise. And yet, Africans still mutinied. A few of these succeeded, the best-known being the case of the *Amistad*. When stowed below, each African had headroom of only 30 inches.

The Middle Passage took between five weeks and three months. Between 10 and 20% of those being transported died. It might have been worse, but captains were paid only for those Africans delivered in "marketable condition." If they treated their cargo humanely, it was only because that was where the money was.

Once docked in America, the enslaved would be sold at auction and renamed by their new masters, perhaps with a lofty, mocking name from antiquity. They had no surnames.

John Rolfe, the man who bought several of those “20 and odd Negroes” back in 1619, introduced them into his tobacco fields as indentured servants, the prevailing form of colonial labor at the time. But the cost of bringing over an indentured servant from England was three times that of a slave—and at the end of the indenture, the servant was free.

Over a period of years, Rolfe’s successors found their farms growing into plantations. A plantation might be defined as an enormous agrarian machine, devoted to the production of a single commodity and dependent on enslaved labor. In 1649, the number of African slaves in the colony of Virginia was 300. By 1671, they numbered 2,000—5% of the population.

Inexorably, the plantation system that grew tobacco in Virginia spread to the Low Country of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, where it grew rice and indigo. It also grew power for the planters in their local statehouses.

But in those first years, the enslaved might still hope to complete their terms of indenture and become free men. Within a century, that had disappeared. Although Maryland was the first colony to specify *durante vita* (service for life) in 1664, it was the 1705 Virginia Slave Codes that would prove a model for the future of the institution.

Slaves had no rights except those granted by their masters. Slaveholders had the right to sell or bequeath slaves, their wives and their children as chattel. The death of a slave while being “corrected” by an owner was not a felony. Owners also had the right to “kill and destroy” runaways.

There were protests by Quakers in Pennsylvania; pamphlets were written in Massachusetts. But white fear carried the day. Just one reason why: In 1712, 23 slaves set a building on fire in New York, then killed nine whites who came to put the fire out. More than 70 slaves were arrested; 21 were hanged.

Thomas Paine was one of the founders of the first American abolition society (Philadelphia, 1775). But in the press of oncoming revolution, it held only four meetings.

In his original draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson included an anti-slavery clause:

> [George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere…

In order to gain unanimous consent for the Declaration, this clause was struck. (Of the 56 signers of the Declaration, 41 owned slaves.)

But even in the midst of war, abolition made gains. Pennsylvania was first, passing the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1780. By 1804, every Northern state had voted to abolish slavery.

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention succeeded in producing that founding document only through monumental compromises, one being that for the purposes of representation, slaves would count as 3/5 of a person. (Of the first 12 presidents, only the two Adamses never owned a slave.)

George Washington’s inauguration found slavery confined to the Atlantic side of the Appalachian Mountains and the Ohio Country free. Immediately, the Southern states insisted on a Fugitive Slave Law, which guaranteed their right to pursue and capture their fleeing slaves even in free states. But 1793 held something even more important.

Cotton has not been mentioned, because cotton was an impossible crop. The bolls were so full of seeds it took a slave an entire day to produce a pound of clean cotton. But with the 1793 invention of the cotton gin by the Yale-educated

Yankee Eli Whitney, two or three slaves could produce 50 pounds a day.

Now the technology to clean the cotton existed, but where was the land to grow it to come from? Beyond the Appalachians were enduring indigenous Native tribes and Louisiana. Neither was promising.

Then, in 1803, Thomas Jefferson purchased Louisiana. There were no laws against slavery in the entire territory, and no one knew how big it was. But who would control the enslaved out there? In 1804, an army of black men on the island of Hispaniola defeated France and created Haiti.

And where would the slaves come from? In 1808, even though they were on the brink of war, Great Britain and the United States abolished the Atlantic slave trade. (Most states had banned it earlier.) Smugglers couldn't possibly supply the vast numbers needed in the new frontier.

As these questions hung in the air, the War of 1812 began. When it was over, federal troops led by Andrew Jackson marched against the Creek Nation, defeating them at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Jackson followed up by wiping out a coalition of Natives and escaped slaves at Negro Fort in 1816. Treaties, made to be broken, did the rest. The entire South could now welcome King Cotton.

"Between 1815 and 1861," Suzanne Everett wrote, "the cotton crop increased from 160 million lbs. to over 2.3 *billion* lbs., 2/3 of all US exports." It was cotton that drove the young United States up the ladder of Capitalism.

But where did they come from, those who worked the cotton in the land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, picking 200 lbs. a day from dawn till dusk? They came from the Eastern Seaboard, in what has been called the Second Middle Passage. Edward Baptist estimates a million enslaved people were forcibly sent west—on foot.

They walked the road in chains, in the coffles in which their ancestors might have been marched across Africa. A typical route ran from Richmond to Natchez, over 1,300 miles. There, they might literally be "sold down the river" to the sugar plantations of Louisiana.

Meanwhile, as the cotton plantations spread across the South, their slave states came into the Union, balanced in number by free Northern states. Then came the complex case of Missouri, site of *Celia, A Slave*.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 set the line dividing free states from slave at Missouri's southern boundary, and balanced its admission with that of Maine. The *northern* boundary of Missouri, however, was almost as far north as New York City, which many abolitionists found disturbing.

More disturbing to the slaveholders were the continued rebellions. In 1831, Nat Turner led a revolt through the Virginia countryside that killed 55-65 whites.

Still, there were successes. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of *The Liberator* in Boston. It would become the flagship newspaper of abolitionism. In 1833, slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire. That same year, the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed.

Then came the Mexican War (1846-48). In its aftermath, the entire Southwest lay open to the possibility of slavery. The Compromise of 1850 allowed California to enter the Union as a free state in exchange for an even harsher Fugitive Slave Act.

In 1850, there were 434,495 free blacks in the

USA and 3,204,313 slaves. During a chapel service at Bowdoin College early that year, a faculty wife named Harriet Beecher Stowe had an idea for a novel about slavery—*Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

Simple, direct and emotional, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an 1852 smash. Dramatized the same year, it would hold the boards in one form or another until 1931. Courtesy of Rodgers & Hammerstein, one can still see its impact today, wherever *The King and I* is performed, as "The Small House of Uncle Thomas."

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Abraham Lincoln's remark to Stowe that she was the little lady who made the big war is apocryphal but true. Little Eva, Eliza and Simon Legree reached thousands who had been deaf to the entreaties of *The Liberator*.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 gave new territories entering the Union the right to decide whether to be slave states or free, superseding the Missouri Compromise. Pro and anti-slavery forces immediately surged into what was to be known as "Bleeding Kansas."

Atrocities were plentiful on both sides, with John Brown, the fiery anti-slavery crusader, losing a son before Kansas was secured as a free state.

By 1855, 60,000 of the enslaved had successfully escaped to the North, either on their own or via the Underground Railroad.

In 1857, the case of Dred Scott, a slave, reached the Supreme Court. Scott had sued for his freedom based on his being taken to a free state. By a 7-2 vote, the court found against him. Chief Justice Roger Taney ruled Scott had no standing to sue, because slaves were not citizens. His ruling further stated that not only Scott, but his entire race "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

On October 16, 1859, John Brown led a raid on the US Armory at Harper's Ferry, VA. This attempt to kindle a slave rebellion ended in utter failure, with Brown captured by a detachment of Marines led by Col. Robert E. Lee. Sentenced to death, he wrote, "I am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood."

Brown was hanged December 2, 1859. In addition to Lee, those present included Prof. Thomas J. (not yet Stonewall) Jackson of VMI, and an actor, John Wilkes Booth.

On November 6, 1860, Abraham Lincoln, who had said, "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free," was elected president. On December 22, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union.

On March 21, 1861, after six more states had seceded, Alexander H. Stephens, the Confederate vice president, gave what is known as the Cornerstone Speech. Slavery, Stephens said, was "the immediate cause of the late rupture and the present revolution… Our new government's foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition."

Three weeks later, Confederate forces fired on Ft. Sumter, in the harbor off the old slave port of Charleston, beginning the Civil War.

Early in 1861, three enterprising souls decided to self-liberate, presenting themselves to the Union forces at Ft. Monroe, Benjamin Butler, commanding. Their master demanded their return. Gen. Butler, who had been a lawyer in civilian life, examined the case and ruled the three men were indeed property. However, since Virginia was in rebellion, property would be seized as

"contraband of war."

Butler's ruling would have the effect of freeing perhaps 10,000 "contrabands" during the course of the war, many of whom would be hired by the Army—and paid for their work.

In an 1862 letter, Lincoln wrote, "My paramount object in the struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

Later that year, Lincoln made his choice. On January 31,1863, the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, abolishing slavery in those states in rebellion. The Proclamation also stated, "[African-American men] of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States." Massachusetts immediately formed the first such unit, the 54th (*Glory*). About 200,000 African-Americans, roughly 10% of the entire armed forces, served in the Union military. Of these, 37,000 died. Some were massacred after surrendering to Confederates.

On April 9, 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, ending the Civil War. Five days later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre in Washington.

On December 18, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. Slavery was officially outlawed in the United States.

In an 1863 letter, Lincoln had written, "There will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart and deceitful speech, they have striven to hinder it."

And there, our story should end. The years following 1865 contain far too much history to be dealt with here. But let one final note bring us up to date. On June 7, 2017, the NAACP issued a travel advisory for the state of Missouri, the only such advisory in its 108-year history: "Individuals traveling in the state are advised to travel with extreme CAUTION," the advisory warned. "Race, gender and color based crimes have a long history in Missouri."

Celia, A Slave stands witness to this.

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Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director. Being possessed of an intense curiosity, he found writing this essay immensely satisfying.