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## A History Defined by the Trade in Human Beings

By Ron Jacobs  
December 31, 2015



*Slave auction in Virginia, 1861.*

The history of the US is soaked in blood. Then again, the same can be said for many nations and certainly every empire. Several nations throughout history have also allowed and even encouraged the taking and use of slaves. None, however, encouraged this practice in a manner or scale equal to the United States. More importantly, no nation has based its economy on the buying, selling and breeding of human beings other than the US. The decisions that went into

this mode of operations were steeped in racism and based in greed. The defining characteristic, however, was the pursuit of profit.

As Ned and Constance Sublette make clear in their comprehensive and exhaustive history, *The American Slave Coast*, that profit was not only determined by the labor of the enslaved but also in the slaves' bodies themselves, including the potential production of more slaves. The authors call this latter status the "capitalized womb." In a manner similar to the projection of an animal's potential reproduction capabilities through several generations, the potential offspring of enslaved girls and women was considered when they were sold and when their owners applied for credit. As an example, supposedly when one kills a hen with their vehicle in some countries, the driver of the vehicle pays the farmer who owned the hen for the hen, but also for all the chickens the hen might have produced and another generation that those chickens would have produced. There is a certain formula used by the legal system in these situations to determine the sum total owed by the offending driver. Slaveowners and traders also agreed upon such a formula in the antebellum United States.

*The American Slave Coast* describes a nation founded in genocide and maintained by an economy based almost entirely on the slave trade. Beginning with the arrival of the first Englishmen on the continent's eastern shores and up to the final battles of the Civil War, the Sublettes describe how virtually every major decision by the colonists and their successors was made with a determination to keep the institution of racialized slavery intact. From the determination of the individual colonies' boundaries to the framing of the constitution and beyond to the annexation of territory, all major legislation was looked at through the prism of how it would affect the human capital held by the slavers.

These holdings were not small. Indeed, some economists and historians believe they measured in the hundreds of millions. This is why, argue the Sublettes, the Civil War was the truly revolutionary war in the United States—because with the Emancipation Proclamation and the defeat of the slaveowning Confederate States of America, those who had the most capital suddenly had none. As the Sublettes write towards the book's end:

"No more counting children as interest. No more multigenerational wealth accumulating from reproduction of enslaved humans to be passed on as legacies to slaveowners' children. No more paying debts in a bad year by cashing out and selling adolescents: the liquidity of the financial system vanished when ownership of the human capital was transferred from landowners to the laborers themselves." (655)

Of course, the construction of racialized slavery was not only maintained by the profits made by slaveowners and traders. It was also enabled by churches, the media, the educational system and the government, all of whom perpetrated a racism that insisted those who were enslaved were subhuman and better off as slaves. Consequently, this book is more than a discussion of the economics of North American slavery. It is also a catalog of brutality, rape, sexual abuse, kidnapping and a multitude of other horrors associated with slavery. There were no humane slaveowners; the very act of owning another human being is inhumane. The structure of slavery built in the US—a structure that intentionally bred humans to sell them for their labor in what they hoped would be a permanent situation—is beyond every definition of inhumane.

One fact this book makes clear is that anyone who was involved in the financial markets or interstate trade in the United States was also involved in the industry of slaveowning, breeding and trading. There was virtually no way around such complicity given the centrality of the slavers' system to the US economy. Indeed, at least a few of today's fortunes were made in the buying and selling of human beings. As the one-term Senator from Ohio Thomas Morris stated in 1839: "The cotton bale and the bank note have formed an alliance...."

Likewise, some of that nation's best-known names were slaveowners, traders and fierce supporters of the institution. Besides the names already known for their involvement—Thomas Jefferson (for whom the Sublettes have no mercy) and George Washington, to name two—there is also the author of the US national anthem, Francis Scott Key. No legitimate argument justifying the involvement of such men (Key was also a powerful lawyer and US Attorney who enforced slavery laws) can be made.

As I read the final chapters of this incredible book, the news came over an internet feed that a grand jury had refused to indict the policeman who killed Cleveland's twelve year old Tamir Rice in November 2014. After going through the seven hundred pages of this history of US slavery and racism, the only thought I had was this: of course, why wouldn't the cop go free? He was only doing the job he was hired to do; only wearing the uniform that made it okay for him to murder young Black people; only wearing the uniform that guaranteed his immunity from prosecution. The grand jury was provided information and opinions by the prosecutors intended to ensure there would be no indictment. Consequently, the jury did what was expected—the majority voted exactly how the masters intended.

Ned and Constance Sublette have provided the world with one of the best history books ever written about the United States. Nominally about the slave breeding industry in the US South, *The American Slave Coast* is actually a sweeping, in-depth survey of the nation known as the United States. The authors skilfully blend economics, politics, military history and personal narratives into a history volume that stands among the best ever published. Written with an eye on the present—a present where the case of Tamir Rice is but one of hundreds—it is a history with a weight that will never begin to be thrown off until it is understood with the same honesty it is told in *The American Slave Coast*.