

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

“There seemed to be a rage for negroes.”

“A Short Sketch of the Debate,” *Charleston Evening Gazette*,
September 28, 1785

When the War for American Independence ended in the early 1780s, many Americans eagerly turned their attention from war to restoration. In a September 1784 letter, Henry Laurens, who had recently made his way down from New York City to Philadelphia, described their activities. “The Merchant, the Farmer, the Mechanic are all busy in their respective vocations,” the South Carolina planter wrote, “covering as fast as they can the marks of British cruelty, by new Buildings, Enclosures, and other Improvements, and recovering their former State of happiness and Prosperity.”¹ When Laurens finally arrived in South Carolina later that year, he too turned his attention to private interests, and like many other low-country planters he set about restoring his rice and indigo plantations. Reorganizing labor was high on the list of priorities. Convinced that their “happiness” and “prosperity” were linked to intensive commercial agriculture, planters rushed to replace slaves lost in the war. Hoping to profit from the seller’s market that ensued, in 1784 a Georgia merchant, quite likely Joseph Clay, wrote to a London firm that “new Negroes from Africa, are, & will be for a very considerable time to come, in great demand with us.”² For the first post–Revolutionary generation, this claim proved to be accurate. Not only would the call for foreign slaves remain at a historically high level throughout the period, after 1795 it rose rapidly.³

The extraordinary demand for black laborers engendered an extraordinary increase in the southern slave population. According to U.S. census records, the southern black population nearly doubled in two decades, rising from 676,637 in 1790 to 909,910 in 1800 and to 1,251,188 in 1810—a net increase of 574,551 in twenty years.⁴ The black population rose 34 percent in the 1790s and 38 percent in the first decade of the 1800s, a rate of increase that has not been matched since. The growth in individual states is even more telling. Between 1790 and 1800 the slave population of Georgia more than doubled, increasing from 29,264 to 59,699 workers. Farther south in the Mississippi territory the number of slaves

jumped five-fold in the first decade of the 1800s, from 3,489 to 17,088. By 1810 even more slaves could be found in Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, Alabama, and Florida.⁵

For the most part, scholars have credited natural growth, rather than foreign traffic, for the large increase in the southern black population while the trade was open. Relying on the calculations made in the 1850s by H. C. Carey, estimates indicate that between 1790 and 1810 natural increase contributed seven times (505,000) as many people as the foreign slave trade (70,000) to the growth of the southern slave population.⁶ No doubt the dramatic events and new ideas and aspirations of the era in which the surge occurred have influenced scholars' perspectives. During what scholar David Brion Davis calls the "age of revolution" many Americans and Western Europeans were becoming more concerned about the oldest and most extreme form of human exploitation and in many cases were trying to end slavery and the slave trade.⁷ However, first in the Carolinas and Georgia and then later across much of the Deep South contradictory forces were at work which prevented the promise of the Revolution from being fulfilled. Rather than emancipation being "efficaciously taken up" during the era as Henry Laurens confidently predicted in 1779, the slave trade resumed and slavery expanded.⁸

I.

The foreign slave trade to British North America was among the first casualties of the War for American Independence. In October 1774 the First Continental Congress adopted the Continental Association, which banned all trade with Great Britain. Although many South Carolinians and Georgians were bitterly opposed to parts of the act, when the British ship *Prince Tom* arrived in Savannah in July 1775 with 180 African captives, officials allowed the vessel's captain Benjamin Mason to disembark only 40 slaves destined for a Savannah River planter. "Afraid it may appear improper abroad," officials ordered the vessel to depart with the remaining 140 slaves. The sailing of the *Prince Tom* marked the end of the colonial transatlantic slave trade to British North America and the beginning of a seven-year suspension of the trade to the new nation.⁹

For many the prohibition against slave imports was an answered prayer, especially for the Quakers, or Society of Friends, as they preferred to be addressed. Since midcentury a small but persistent group had been attempting to convince fellow members of the Friends to abandon slaveholding and the slave trade. Certain that slave imports perpetuated and strengthened slavery, they aimed most of their criticisms at slave trafficking. In meetings, newspapers, and tracts Friends condemned the slave trade as "a very wicked and abominable practice contrary to the natural rights and privileges of all mankind, and against the Golden Rule of doing to others as we would be done unto."¹⁰ However, both within and outside the Society of Friends, the Quakers won few converts to their antislavery

viewpoint until Revolutionary ideology began to spread in the 1770s. The invocation of universal liberty and equality resonated with black and with many white colonists, and they began moving against slavery and the slave trade.¹¹

By the mid-1780s, antislavery supporters had made significant gains. Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont had abolished slavery; Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania had passed gradual abolition laws; and New York and New Jersey were debating abolition. In the upper South, Quakers, Methodists, and natural-rights proponents had succeeded in bringing the issues to forefront of public consciousness and convinced thousands of slave owners to manumit their slaves. The campaign against the slave trade was even more successful. When the war ended, all of the New England and middle states plus Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware refused to allow slave imports and within a few years they all permanently banned the foreign slave trade. It appeared that American beliefs in liberty and equality, which had triumphed over of the greatest power on earth, were well on their way to vanquishing slavery and the slave trade.¹²

Unfortunately Revolutionary principles, as antislavery supporters would soon learn, were not a panacea, especially in the lower South. This does not mean that Revolutionary ideology and its talk of rights fell on deaf ears in the Carolinas and Georgia. Residents of the region not only mulled over the issue, but there is considerable evidence that many were won over to the antislavery viewpoint.¹³ Among the first members of lowcountry society to link the language used by patriots against England and their plight were Charleston blacks. In response to public demonstrations held in Charleston against the Stamp Act in 1765, a group of slaves took to the streets “crying out ‘Liberty.’” Henry Laurens dismissed the incident as “a thoughtless imitation” of the white protestors, but other Charlestonians were not so sure.¹⁴ Soon after the incident, rumors spread of an impending slave revolt, and officials called out the militia and imposed extreme controls on the black population.¹⁵ This experience and the ever-present reality that slaves outnumbered whites discouraged public antislavery sentiment in the region for an extended period. The ten year period of calm was broken on the eve of the War for American Independence. In the Darien Resolutions, drafted in early 1775 by a wealthy and influential slave owner, Lachlan McIntosh, a group of Darien, Georgia, freemen declared their “disapprobation and abhorrence of the unnatural practice of Slavery in America.”¹⁶ Once fighting began and unrest swept the South, nervous whites became much more cautious. However, once peace was restored in 1782, protests resumed. Condemnations of the recently resumed foreign slave trade were especially vitriolic. Writing in a 1783 Charleston newspaper, “Another Patriot” called attention to the flying of the American flag “in every yard where unfortunate Africans are penned for sale.” Veterans of the Revolutionary War, the writer concluded, “must burn with indignation at such an affront to it.”¹⁷ Another writer was even

more direct: in 1785 he or she described the slave trade as “shocking to humanity, cruel, wicked, and diabolical.”¹⁸

In public proslavery supporters ignored the attacks. No proslavery responses appeared in South Carolina or Georgia newspapers, and apparently no pressure was brought to bear on newspaper editors to stop publishing the attacks, as they continued until the Haitian Revolution erupted in 1791.¹⁹ Behind closed doors, however, South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina political leaders made sure that slavery and the slave trade did not become major issues. When Georgia and South Carolina representatives learned in 1776 that Thomas Jefferson, in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, had condemned King George III for enslaving innocent Africans, they demanded he strike the entire section, which he promptly did.²⁰ Less than a month after the Declaration of Independence was signed, one of South Carolina’s delegates to the convention, Thomas Lynch, declared that if it was to be debated “whether their Slaves are their Property, there is an end of the Convention.”²¹

A decade later, at the Constitutional Convention, lower South delegates were not able to head off debate on the slave trade, and it came under serious attack. George Mason of Virginia condemned the trade as “infernal” and “lamented that some our Eastern brethren had from the lust of gain embarked on the nefarious traffic.” He concluded with a warning that if slavery was allowed to expand through the slave trade it “would bring the judgment of heaven” on the nation and ultimately “national calamities.”²² Maryland delegate Luther Martin argued that trafficking in slaves was “inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character to have such a feature in the Constitution.”²³ John Rutledge of South Carolina fired back that “religion and humanity had nothing to do with this question,” that it was a matter of “interest” alone. Like many other lowcountry planters he believed that a shortage of labor and an odious climate required a constant supply of slaves. A few days later Rutledge brought the debate to an end when he threatened that South Carolina or Georgia “can never receive a plan if it prohibits the slave trade; and if the Convention thought” that their states would consent to a prohibition of the trade, “the expectation is in vain.”²⁴ More interested in preserving the union than abolishing the slave trade, a majority of the delegates accommodated the lower South, and slave trafficking remained under the individual state’s authority for twenty years.

Despite the fact that the South Carolina legislature had recently banned slave imports for three years, most free residents of the state supported the slave trade clause to the Constitution. They heartily agreed with Rawlin Lowndes when he declared in the South Carolina legislature in 1788 that “Negroes [are] our wealth, our only natural resource.”²⁵ After all, slave-produced rice and indigo had brought great prosperity to the colonial South Carolina lowcountry. Indeed, historian Alice Hanson Smith estimates that the private wealth of South Carolina planters and merchants was unsurpassed in British North America. Nowhere else

in the region did such a large percentage of the free population live so well.²⁶ Convinced that this wealth was inseparably linked to slavery, both well-established and newly arrived planters and farmers turned their back on Revolutionary principles and forged ahead with restoration of slavery.

It would not be a simple task. The War for American Independence had wrecked slavery in the lower South. In the “years of general . . . calamity” waves of British soldiers, patriots, Loyalists, Tories, and black maroons swept over large areas of Georgia and South Carolina like a tidal wave disordering plantation life.²⁷ Some slaves took advantage of the chaos and escaped, while others were evacuated, and still more, abandoned without proper clothing, food, shelter, and medical care, fell victim to starvation, exposure, and disease. The disorder decimated the slave populations of South Carolina and Georgia. In South Carolina the slave population declined by 25,000 people, or 25 percent. In Georgia the decrease was even more precipitous as 10,000, or two-thirds of the prewar population of 15,000 slaves, died, escaped, or left the region on British ships at the end of the war.²⁸

As soon as the British vessels disappeared over the horizon, planters began scouring the countryside for labor, but early on most came up empty-handed. In 1782 only a handful of slaves were available for sale in the entire region. The extended interruption of the African trade and losses during the war drove prices up from an average of forty pounds for a “seasoned Negro” in 1776 to two hundred guineas in 1782.²⁹ Although prices fell after imports resumed in 1783, they remained at a high level, averaging between seventy and one hundred pounds, or 50 percent more than prewar prices, throughout 1783 and 1784. Hoping to profit from the high prices, a group in Charleston formed a company for the purpose of “carrying on the slave trade to the coast of Africa.”³⁰ Many others were attracted as well, and from the fall of 1783 to late 1785 slavers disembarked more than 10,000 enslaved laborers in Charleston alone. Only after most of the planters’ capital and credit had been exhausted did prices and shipments begin to decline in early 1785. Although slave ships continued to arrive and sold out quickly, by late 1785 prices had fallen to prewar levels.³¹

As they had during the colonial era, most planters bought slaves on credit; however, they soon discovered that paying back the loans would take much longer after the war than it had before 1775. Exorbitant interest rates, cancellation of England’s indigo bounty, a ban on direct trade between the United States and Britain’s colonies, and a series of poor rice harvests precluded many slave owners from repaying their prewar debts, much less loans for newly acquired Africans. In an effort to increase the value of slaves, improve the balance of trade, and reduce debts, in 1787 the South Carolina legislature prohibited the importation of slaves for three years.³² The state government had outlawed imports, but it did not eliminate what one representative described as “a rage for Negroes.”³³ Instead, according to historian Winthrop D. Jordan, it was “a matter of men denying themselves what they wanted but could not afford.”³⁴

Despite the ban slavers continued to land enslaved laborers in North Carolina, Georgia, Spanish Florida, Louisiana, and even South Carolina. Lowcountry planters in South Carolina and Georgia bought some of the captives, but most ended up away from the coast in the upcountry of the lower South and lower Mississippi Valley. Settlers had begun moving into the regions before the war, but when Britain ceded most of the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River to the United States at the end of the war, the migration accelerated. It accelerated again when Thomas Jefferson bought Louisiana in 1803.³⁵ It is difficult for contemporary Americans to imagine the magnitude of the expansion of the United States that occurred between the end of the war in 1783 and the Louisiana Purchase twenty years later. At the beginning of the era most southerners lived and worked within one hundred miles of the Atlantic Ocean. Two decades later they had pushed the line of settlement more than seven hundred miles inland to the Texas border. In the process the American South added not just hundreds of thousands of acres, but hundreds of thousands of square miles.³⁶

The lure of “large bodies of fertile lands . . . yet uncultivated” beckoned the thousands of farmers and planters.³⁷ Although prices varied, most of the land was extremely cheap, even free. To attract settlers, southern states, territories, and the Spanish crown sold millions of acres for ten dollars per one hundred acres or less. Millions more were awarded to Revolutionary soldiers in headright grants and in enormous speculative grants. In South Carolina alone, more than eight million acres were handed out in speculative grants to 253 individuals between 1785 and 1794.³⁸ Even after the cotton gin was introduced to the lower Mississippi Valley in 1795, land costs remained at comparatively low levels. At the turn of the century, unimproved land along the Mississippi River in the vicinity of Natchez was readily available for fifty cents per acre, and improved lands under cultivation were selling at from two to ten dollars an acre.³⁹ Not all southern land was suited for commercial agriculture, for instance, the Appalachian Mountains and the pine barrens, but much of it was productive, especially the Piedmont regions of the Carolinas and Georgia and the fertile valley lands in the lower Mississippi Valley.

To clear their fields, construct buildings and fences, and herd their livestock and cultivate crops, settlers demanded enslaved laborers. Like lowcountry planters, westward-moving settlers were convinced that slaves were a necessity, but, unlike lowcountry planters, western settlers were not ready in 1787 to ban slave imports temporarily. As previously mentioned, Rutledge, Pinckney, and other lowcountry planters claimed that a semitropical climate and labor-intensive crops made slavery necessary, but only in the lowcountry. This argument was based on their assumption that the western lands could develop without slavery. Thus, once they had imported enough Africans to replace the laborers they had lost in the war, lowcountry planters were willing to halt slave imports until they were needed again. Upcountry representatives disagreed and complained that the ban

was “a direct Bar to the Increase of the Wealth and population” of their region.⁴⁰ This same argument was repeated over and over again by westward-moving Americans. In a 1804 letter to the U.S. secretary of state James Madison, Louisiana’s first territorial governor, William C. C. Claiborne, reported that “citizens seem impressed with an opinion that, a great, very great supply of slaves is essential to the prosperity of Louisiana.”⁴¹ Slavery and the conviction that it was directly linked to wealth were migrating along with the hundreds of thousands of westward-moving settlers.

To pay for slaves, settlers and well-established planters and farmers produced staples for the commercialized economy. In the lowcountry rice was the major crop, but by the late 1780s sea-island cotton had caught the attention of many planters and was fast becoming popular. Inland planters and farmers also grew cotton but mainly for domestic use. For them tobacco was the cash crop, replacing indigo. When the war ended, westward-moving settlers spread what scholar Joyce E. Chaplin describes as “the well-established commercial cultivation of tobacco,” and by the early 1790s tobacco was being cultivated widely in Kentucky, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Georgia, and the lower Mississippi Valley.⁴² The new production more than compensated for the decline that was occurring in the Chesapeake as Virginia and Maryland planters switched from tobacco to wheat. Consequently exports of American tobacco increased 36 percent between 1770 and 1790.⁴³ The growth of inland and lower Mississippi Valley slave populations suggests many planters and farmers used tobacco profits to buy laborers. In the postwar 1780s the backcountry slave population of South Carolina and Georgia increased by nearly nineteen thousand people, or 68 percent. Another twenty-two thousand enslaved laborers migrated into the Kentucky Territory and lower Mississippi Valley.⁴⁴

One case, that of Thomas Foster, mirrored many settlers’ experience. In the last year of the War for American Independence, Foster, his widowed mother, and his two older brothers, departed war-torn South Carolina in search of peace and opportunity. By 1783 they had found what they were looking for near the village of Natchez in the lower Mississippi Valley. Foster’s mother was able to quickly obtain land through a series of Spanish grants and purchases, and all three of her sons married and started families soon after they arrived in the Natchez area. After his brothers began buying lands of their own, Thomas and his wife Sarah took over responsibility of running his mother’s farm. When he purchased an adjoining parcel of 425 acres in 1788, he increased their holdings to nearly a thousand acres. To help clear, improve, and farm the property, he purchased in 1787 an America-born black man, Jesse, brought down from Kentucky, and a year later two newly arrived Africans, Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima and Samba, for \$930. For the Africans Thomas paid \$150 down in silver, and he gave his bond for the next two tobacco harvests for the balance. Although prices for the crop would decline significantly over the next two years, Jesse, Ibrahima, and

Samba produced enough tobacco to pay off their owner's debt. The following year their labor funded the purchase of yet another slave.⁴⁵

In five years Foster had significantly increased his holdings in land and people; however, over the next two decades improvements in agricultural technology, rich land, plentiful slave labor, and rising cotton prices would allow him and thousands of other southerners to amass wealth at an even faster pace. In the early 1790s Foster abandoned tobacco for cotton. Although the first few years his slaves performed the time-consuming task of cleaning the staple by hand, he was able to profit from cotton cultivation from the very beginning. In 1794 Thomas used a portion of the profits and the previous harvest, seven hundred dollars and nine hundred pounds of cotton, to purchase four slaves, twenty-five-year-old Isabella and her children, Jacob, age ten, Anaky, five, and Limerick, two. The next year, the first cotton gin began operating in Natchez, and he and many other nearby farmers and planters entered a period of extended prosperity. During the next fifteen years he would expand his property in land, livestock, and people. His cattle herd grew from 40 head in 1792 to 140 in 1820. He bought his mother's plantation and other surrounding plots, and by 1812 his plantation sprawled over 1,785 acres. He also purchased a number of valuable lots in Natchez, built an impressive new home, and constructed a horse-powered cotton gin and a grist mill. To cultivate cotton and maintain and operate his equipment, he added more slaves. By 1800 he owned twenty, then by 1810 forty and by 1820 more than one hundred. Natural increase and inheritance were responsible for some of the buildup, but most of the slaves were purchased. For all of these additions, Foster paid cash generated from cotton cultivation.⁴⁶

Certainly not all cotton farmers and planters accumulated wealth as fast as Foster; nevertheless the staple enriched thousands in the Carolinas, Georgia, and the lower Mississippi Valley. In many ways it was the ideal crop. Unlike rice, which required large capital outlays, an extensive, skilled workforce, and extraordinary conditions, cotton cultivation required only a few small tools and access to a gin and baler. Moreover it thrived in large parts of the South, it could be grown profitably by one person or a hundred, storage and transportation were inexpensive, and in the 1790s and the first decade of the 1800s prices remained well above profitable levels. Through hard work, good management, and a run of good luck, as Thomas Foster had, many southerners were able to acquire more land and slaves and successfully make the transition from settler to planter.⁴⁷

Cotton, however, was not the only staple that came into its own during the 1790s. At the same time Eli Whitney was developing the cotton gin in Georgia, Etienne de Boré was perfecting advances in the cultivation and manufacturing of sugar in Louisiana. For decades planters in southern Louisiana had been experimenting on a small scale with sugar, but after a series of indigo crop failures and the collapse of sugar production in Santo Domingo, they were ready to take the plunge. Boré showed them the way. In the mid-1790s Boré built a

modern sugar mill, a drying room, and a warehouse; brought in a skilled sugar maker from Santo Domingo; organized a large slave workforce; and planted sugarcane on a large enough scale to make his investment in land, equipment, and slaves pay. In 1795 he sold his first crop for twelve thousand dollars and cleared five thousand dollars. Word of his success quickly spread and by 1801 seventy-five sugar operations were producing five million pounds of sugar worth four hundred thousand dollars.⁴⁸

Over the next decade many planters were able to replicate Boré's success. In an 1806 letter to President Thomas Jefferson, Gov. William C. C. Claiborne marveled at the wealth sugar planters were amassing. According to Claiborne, "there are several planters, whose field Negroes do not exceed forty who make more than 20,000 Dollars each year."⁴⁹ The extraordinary profits did not go unnoticed, and sugar plantations sprang up along the Mississippi River. Consequently by 1811 Louisiana sugar output had nearly doubled. In addition to brown sugar, slaves were producing 3,590 casks of molasses and more than 5,000 gallons of tafia.⁵⁰ Convinced that only slaves were suited for heavy work in the hot climate, sugar planters imported thousands of enslaved laborers in the late 1790s and early 1800s. The migration transformed southern Louisiana, especially along the Mississippi River above and below New Orleans. Not well suited for indigo or cotton the region had not supported a large black population before the mid-1790s, but, once the sugar boom commenced, the slave population skyrocketed, and by 1810 sugar parishes contained some of the largest plantations and concentrations of enslaved laborers in the North America. In St. Charles parish, located north of New Orleans, slaves comprised over 70 percent of the total population. More than one visitor to the region noted the similarity of the sugar plantations districts in the West Indies and Louisiana.⁵¹

From the end of the War for American Independence until 1806 comparatively low slave prices aided the expansion of slavery. When the British army abandoned the lower South in 1782, prices for prime slaves rose to the \$400 to \$500 range, but after a flood of imports between 1783 and 1785 costs dropped to much more affordable levels, the mid \$200s, where they would remain until the mid 1790s. A \$250 investment in a slave during this era yielded between 3 and 8 percent. As cotton and sugar culture began expanding in the mid 1790s, demand and prices for slaves increased, but the rate of return on investments in enslaved workers rose as well, especially in the "best lands of the new Southwest, the Mississippi alluvium" and the better Carolinas and Georgia uplands.⁵² In the early 1800s prime slaves sold for less than \$400 in Natchez, Mississippi, where planters could expect that a field hand could generate from \$100 to \$200 annually, minus the cost of their food, clothing, and shelter, which was not very great. Natchez planters such as Thomas Foster who used slaves to cultivate cotton achieved rates as high as 10 to 13 percent on their investment. Rice and sugar planters realized even greater returns, in some cases more than two times as much.⁵³

As the end of the individual state's authority over foreign slave imports approached, which would come in 1808, the fear that Congress would abolish slave traffic for good sent demand for enslaved laborers through the roof. In response to the possibility of a federal ban, the South Carolina legislature repealed the law prohibiting the importation of slaves in late 1803, and in early 1804 once again slavers began inundating Charleston with African captives. By the time Congress closed the trade four years later, they had disembarked over fifty thousand foreign slaves in the port.⁵⁴ Despite the record forced migration, more slaves arrived in North America in that four-year period than in any decade prior to that; African captives brought prices not seen since the years immediately preceding and following the War for American Independence. For instance, in nominal dollars in 1775 Africans brought an average price of \$240, in 1783 \$360, and in 1807 \$390.⁵⁵

Between 1783 and 1810 prevailing ideological, political, and economical forces combined in the South to create a strong demand for slaves. Although many southerners embraced new cultural, intellectual, and technology developments in the Revolutionary era, they could not turn away from the pre-Revolutionary belief that given certain conditions—cheap, fertile land and worldwide demand for agricultural staples—wealth and slavery were intertwined. They knew that in the past and quite possibly in the future a slave–staple crop society would enable many enterprising farmers to enter the planter class, and, of course, it did. The forces translated into good fortune for many well-established farmers and planters and westward-moving settlers and a nightmare for slaves. To meet the demand for enslaved laborers, tens of thousands more Africans were captured and transported to North America, and tens of thousands of American-born slaves were forced to migrate inland.

II.

As slavery expanded across the South, the slave population increased by nearly 575,000, or more than 80 percent, between 1790 and 1810. Scholars maintain that the slave population itself, not emigration from abroad, was responsible for most of the increase. Their argument was buttressed in the late 1960s, when Curtin estimated that only about 70,000 enslaved Africans were imported during the two decades.⁵⁶ This would mean that natural growth was responsible for the remaining new African Americans, numbering more than 500,000.⁵⁷ Certainly natural increase was the most significant factor in explaining the growth in the period, but the foreign slave trade contributed much more to the growth than previously thought.

Curtin based his estimate on the calculations performed by H. C. Carey in the 1850s. Like most scholars, Carey employed early census records when he made one of the first and most enduring projections. Because it is still repeated by recent authorities, it is important to see just how Carey went about calculating his much-used estimate. Assuming that South Carolina and Georgia were the

only states that imported foreign slaves after the American Revolution, Carey based his calculations mainly on the 1790, 1800, and 1810 censuses for these two states. From their combined slave population increase of 69,197 between 1790 and 1800, he subtracted 9,000 to account for the slaves who migrated with their masters from states north of South Carolina and Georgia. He assumed, on average, that each white immigrant family numbered five and brought with them one slave. He subtracted an additional 34,000 to account for natural growth, based on the assumption that the South Carolina and Georgia slave populations grew naturally at a 25 percent decennial rate. He maintained that the difference of 26,197 was the number of foreign slaves imported during the 1790s.

For the next decade, 1800 to 1810, Carey used the same assumptions and formula. He subtracted the estimated number of domestic slave immigrants (25,000) and the estimated natural increase in the slave population (50,000) from 96,000, the difference between the local slave populations in 1800 and 1810. He attributed the resulting figure of 21,000 to the foreign slave trade. However, in a discussion of the nationwide growth of the black population during the decade, Carey correctly concluded that more than 21,000 must have been imported. Consequently he raised the 1800 to 1810 importation volume from 21,000 to 26,000, which conveniently equaled his 1790 to 1800 estimate. To his total for the two decades (52,000), he added 1,400, which he claimed was the number of slaves imported from 1782 to 1790.⁵⁸ The additions of these estimates should have added up to 53,400, but a few pages later, when totaling the number of slaves imported into North America from the colonial era through the nineteenth century, with no explanation, Carey lists 70,000 as “imported subsequent to 1790.”⁵⁹

Carey’s calculations were flawed by questionable assumptions. He assumed that only 1,400 Africans were imported from 1782 to 1790, no foreign slaves were taken to North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, or Mississippi between 1782 and 1810, no Chesapeake slaves were sold and sent West or South without their masters, and no slaves were manumitted. He also used an overly optimistic natural decennial growth rate for the slave population, and he ignored the possibility that newly imported African slaves could have died before census workers could count them. All these mistaken assumptions, when combined, caused Carey to grossly underestimate the volume of the U.S. foreign slave trade, both in his explicit calculations of just over 50,000 and his more familiar general estimate of 70,000. Nevertheless, Carey’s 70,000 figure has been, and continues to be, the most widely repeated by historians.⁶⁰

This has not prevented other scholars from estimating the volume of the trade. In 1950, for instance, in his book *The History of Sugar*, Noel Deerr calculated the volume of the slave trade to North America. Deerr based his estimate mainly on New York congressman L. Mitchell’s 1804 speech condemning the smuggling of slaves into South Carolina. The congressman quoted an unknown source “who had computed that as many as twenty thousand enslaved negroes had been

transported from Guinea” into South Carolina the previous year.⁶¹ With this in mind, Deerr posited that “for the years 1786–1808, an annual average of 15,000 does not seem improbable, giving a total over the period of 420,000.”⁶² Deerr’s estimate was bold. It was more than seven times greater than Carey’s, but, not surprisingly, his estimate has largely been ignored, as scholars continued to rely on Carey’s calculations.

Historians quoted Carey’s 70,000 figure for a number of reasons. First, Carey based his estimate on evidence. Unlike Deerr, for instance, Carey used something concrete, census records, to calculate the volume of the trade. Second, until the late 1960s, scholars had little interest in, and limited tools for, solving quantitative problems, especially one as formidable as estimating the volume of the Atlantic slave trade, in whole or in part.⁶³ In 1961 Basil Davidson expressed an attitude toward the problem common for a precomputer generation, when he noted in his book on the slave trade that “nobody knows or ever will know; either the necessary records are missing or they were never made.”⁶⁴ Third, because scholars viewed North American slavery as benign when compared to other slave societies elsewhere in the New World, they credited natural growth for the rapid slave population increases.⁶⁵ Finally, through the racial calculus that turned African forced migrants into nonmigrants, many scholars of American immigration almost entirely ignored this inflow from Africa. They too argued, instead, that a high rate of reproduction, not immigration, was the source of black population increases. Harry H. Laughlin expressed this view when he wrote in 1939 that Africans “came to labor, but remained to breed.”⁶⁶

Using Carey’s estimate, generations of historians argued that slave imports declined precipitously after the Revolution when compared with colonial rates. Even when social science attitudes toward quantitative problems began to change in the late 1960s, historians of the early national period continued to ignore the foreign slave trade of the United States. Following Curtin’s lead, scholarly interest in the overall Atlantic slave trade increased, and in this broad context the U.S. slave trade “appeared insignificant” because it accounted for less than 5 percent of the estimated total number of Africans brought to the Americas.⁶⁷ When Curtin published his pioneering quantitative overview of the entire trade in 1969, he gave added credibility to Carey’s estimate by incorporating it into his authoritative study more than a century after it first appeared.

Curtin’s work profoundly revised Atlantic slave trade thinking and scholarship. For most of this century, it was supposed that the Atlantic slave trade was responsible for shipping a minimum of fifteen million persons to the Americas between the fifteenth and nineteenth century. A demographer, R. R. Kuczynski, was responsible for publicizing the figure in the 1930s. Almost everyone, including historians, journalists, and demographers, seemed to use this estimate until Curtin showed that it was based on a nineteenth-century guess. Having demonstrated that the figure could not be supported, he set about calculating a new one

based on more concrete evidence. He examined different regions and suggested that the total might be much lower—around ten million, give or take twenty percent.⁶⁸

In the last decade, however, Curtin's overall estimate has been the subject of intense scrutiny.⁶⁹ Although he still holds the high ground, his critics have shown that in some areas his estimates are based on uncertain or overly general assumptions. His brief treatment of the U.S. foreign slave trade may represent such a case. Curtin, intent upon showing the overall dimensions of the Atlantic trade in slaves over four centuries, was aware that the entire North American traffic, before and after U.S. independence, represented a very small portion, scarcely 5 percent, of the whole picture, and the majority of arrivals came before the War for American Independence. As a result, he included only a few sentences on the U.S. trade in *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, in which he succinctly concludes that "Carey's further estimate of 70,000 for the period 1791–1807 would complete the period of the legal slave trade at a total in the vicinity of 345,000." When estimating the total volume of the North American slave trade from 1781 to 1810, he did, however, add 22,000 to Carey's 70,000 figure to account for imports from 1781 to 1790 and for foreign slaves imported into the French, Spanish, and English North American regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida.⁷⁰

Only a handful of historians have questioned Carey's and Curtin's North American post-Revolution estimates. Among the most notable are cliometricians Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman. Focusing on Carey, they suggested that he had miscalculated the volume of the foreign slave trade. In their controversial 1974 book, *Time on the Cross*, they pointed out that Carey had erred in his original calculations, underestimating the number of foreign slaves imported between 1790 and 1807. According to Fogel and Engerman, Carey overestimated the natural growth rate. They maintained that, instead of 25 percent per decade as Carey had argued, the slave population increased at a much slower natural growth rate of 2 percent per year. Using the 2 percent annual figure, they calculated that 291,126 Africans had been imported between 1780 and 1810.⁷¹ Fogel and Engerman's estimate flew in the face of conventional scholarship, but it appears that they erred on the high side. Their natural growth rate estimate was too low. Certainly, in some regions of the South the annual growth rate equaled 2 percent or was even lower, but overall, as argued in the following chapter, it surpassed their figure. Unfortunately, Fogel and Engerman's discussion of Carey's estimate and their speculation on a much larger volume for the post-Revolutionary foreign slave trade has been largely ignored.⁷²

More than a century after Carey published his estimate and almost fourteen years after Curtin upheld it, Allan Kulikoff took the first step toward actually testing Carey's and Curtin's estimates. In a 1983 essay, "Uprooted Peoples: Black Migrants in the Age of the American Revolution, 1790–1820," Kulikoff investigated the massive black migration, domestic and foreign, that occurred in the