

Slavery in the United States (1837)



CHARLES BALL

Charles Ball grew up in slavery in Maryland, during the period in which tobacco slavery was becoming less profitable. Born about 1780, he was separated from his mother at an early age when her enslaver sold her to buyers from the growing slave region of the South Carolina and Georgia backcountry. By the time Ball grew up, and was married and the father of two young children, he might have hoped to become one of the many Maryland slaves who was able to buy his freedom from an enslaver who wasn't making much money from slavery. Instead, as we see here, in 1805 he became one of the many who was sold to the new cotton region developing down where his mother had already been sent—that was the other way that Chesapeake enslavers had to deal with the lack of profit in the decaying tobacco economy.

Ball describes his travel in the slave trader's gang (or "coffle") in greater detail than we excerpt here, but the reader should know that slave trading was also in the process of becoming a big and efficient business that used a lot of capital and incorporated many modern business practices. When the coffle he was in reached South Carolina, Ball was sold to a wealthy planter named Wade Hampton, and taken to Congaree, Hampton's labor camp, to grow and pick cotton. There Ball learned how cotton was made, and he details techniques of labor management and extraction that helped ensure that the productivity of slave labor would rise about 2 percent a year in the period from 1800 to the start of the Civil War in 1861.

Ball suffered tremendously, as he reports. He watched people

tortured because they didn't meet production targets—didn't pick cotton quickly enough, in short—he didn't have enough food to eat, and he watched people all around him suffering from malaria, nutritional deficiencies, intense depression, and other diseases. But unlike most enslaved people, he was able to escape. His secret journey from the Georgia-Carolina border all the way to Maryland to reunite with his family culminated in them moving to the free state of Pennsylvania, where he told his story to an editor; it was written up and published in 1837. This was one of the first reports from someone who had truly been inside the powerful engine of much of American economic growth before 1850—the ever-more-efficient system of cotton production on slavery's expanding frontier.

My grandfather was brought from Africa, and sold as a slave in Calvert county, in Maryland, about the year 1730. [...] My mother was the slave of a tobacco planter, an old man, who died, according to the best of my recollection, when I was about four years old, leaving his property in such a situation that it became necessary, as I suppose, to sell a part of it to pay his debts. Soon after his death, several of his slaves, and with others myself, were sold at public venue. [This was 1785] My mother had several children, my brothers and sisters, and we were all sold on the same day to different purchasers. Our new master took us away, and I never saw my mother, nor any of my brothers and sisters afterwards. [...] My mother was sold to a Georgia trader, who soon after that carried her away from Maryland. [...] At the time I was sold I was quite naked, having never had any clothes in my life; but my new master had brought with him a child's frock or wrapper, belonging to one of his own children; and after he had purchased me, he dressed me in this garment, took me before him on his horse, and started home; but my poor mother, when she saw me leaving her for the last time, ran after me, took me down from the horse, clasped me in her arms, and wept loudly and

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bitterly over me. [. . .] [She] besought my master to buy her and the rest of her children, and not permit them to be carried away by the negro buyers; but whilst thus entreating him to save her and her family, the slave-driver, who had first bought her, came running in pursuit of her with a raw hide in his hand. [. . .] He gave her two or three heavy blows on the shoulders with his raw hide, snatched me from her arms, handed me to my master, and seizing her by one arm, dragged her back towards the place of sale. My master then quickened the pace of his horse; and as we advanced, the cries of my poor parent became more and more indistinct. [. . .] I never again heard the voice of my poor mother.

[. . .] [We now jump forward to 1805.] My master kept a store at a small village on the bank of the Patuxent river [. . .] although he resided at some distance on a farm. One morning he rose early, and ordered me to take a yoke of oxen and go to the village, to bring home a cart which was there, saying he would follow me. He arrived at the village soon after I did, and took his breakfast with his store-keeper. He then told me to come into the house and get my breakfast. Whilst I was eating in the kitchen, I observed him talking earnestly, but lowly, to a stranger near the kitchen door. I soon after went out, and hitched my oxen to the cart, and was about to drive off, when several men came round about me, and amongst them the stranger whom I had seen speaking with my master. This man came up to me, and, seizing me by the collar, shook me violently, saying I was his property, and must go with him to Georgia. At the sound of these words, the thoughts of my wife and children rushed across my mind, and my heart died away within me. I saw and knew that my case was hopeless, and that resistance was vain, as there were near twenty persons present, all of whom were ready to assist the man by whom I was kidnapped. I felt incapable of weeping or speaking, and in my despair I laughed loudly. My purchaser ordered me to cross my hands behind, which were quickly bound with a strong cord; and he then told me that we must set out that very day for the south. I asked

if I could not be allowed to go to see my wife and children, or if this could not be permitted, if they might not have leave to come to see me; but was told that I would be able to get another wife in Georgia.

My new master [. . .] took me that same day across the Patuxent, where I joined fifty-one other slaves, whom he had bought in Maryland. Thirty-two of these were men, and nineteen were women. The women were merely tied together with a rope, about the size of a bed cord, which was tied like a halter round the neck of each; but the men, of whom I was the stoutest and strongest [. . .] A strong iron collar was closely fitted by means of a padlock round each of our necks. A chain of iron, about a hundred feet in length, was passed through the hasp of each padlock, except at the two ends, where the hasps of the padlocks passed through a link of the chain. In addition to this, we were handcuffed in pairs, with iron staples and bolts, with a short chain, about a foot long, uniting the handcuffs and their wearers in pairs. In this manner we were chained alternately by the right and left hand. [. . .] Taking up our line of march, we travelled about five miles that evening, and stopped for the night at one of those miserable public houses, so frequent in the lower parts of Maryland and Virginia, called "ordinaries."

We all lay down on the naked floor to sleep in our handcuffs and chains. The women, my fellow-slaves, lay on one side of the room; and the men who were chained with me, occupied the other. I slept but little this night, which I passed in thinking of my wife and little children, whom I could not hope ever to see again. I also thought of my grandfather, and of the long nights I had passed with him, listening to his narratives of the scenes through which he had passed in Africa. I at length fell asleep, but was distressed by painful dreams. My wife and children appeared to be weeping and lamenting my calamity; and beseeching and imploring my master on their knees, not to carry me away from them. My little boy came and begged me not to go and leave him, and endeavoured, as I thought, with his little hands to break the fetters that bound me. I awoke in agony and

cursed my existence. I seemed to be full, and I compassion on earth, for came, and with the dawn corn and tobacco-fields. they were not, like me, and friends. Compared almost envied them the

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cursed my existence. I could not pray, for the measure of my woes seemed to be full, and I felt as if there was no mercy in heaven, nor compassion on earth, for a man who was born a slave. Day at length came, and with the dawn, we resumed our journey towards the Potomac. As we passed along the road, I saw the slaves at work in the corn and tobacco-fields. I knew they toiled hard and lacked food but they were not, like me, dragged in chains from their wives, children, and friends. Compared with me, they were the happiest of mortals. I almost envied them their blessed lot.

[Ball next recounts his month-long march to South Carolina and his sale to Wade Hampton. After the sale he was marched to Hampton's labor camp "Congaree," where the morning after his arrival he was awakened by the blowing of a loud plantation horn that summoned all of the enslaved people to their daily labor.]

The overseer then led off to the field, with his horn in one hand and his whip in the other; we following—men, women, and children, promiscuously—and a wretched looking troop we were. There was not an entire garment amongst us. More than half of the gang were entirely naked. Several young girls, who had arrived at puberty, wearing only the livery with which nature had ornamented them, and a great number of lads, of an equal or superior age, appeared in the same costume. [. . .] Not one of the others had on even the remains of two pieces of apparel. Some of the men had old shirts, and some ragged trousers, but no one wore both. Amongst the women, several wore petticoats, and many had shifts. Not one of the whole number wore both of these vestments.

We walked nearly a mile through one vast cotton field, before we arrived at the place of our intended day's labour. At last the overseer stopped at the side of the field, and calling to several of the men by name, ordered them to call their companies and turn into their rows. The work we had to do today was to hoe and weed cotton, [. . .] the men whose names had been called [. . .] were designated as captains, each of whom had under his command a certain number of the other

bands. The captain was the foreman of his company, and those under his command had to keep up with him. Each of the men and women had to take one row. [. . .] The first captain, whose name was Simon, took the first row,—and the other captains were compelled to keep up with him. By this means the overseer had nothing to do but to keep Simon hard at work, and he was certain that all the others must work equally hard.

Simon was a stout, strong man, apparently about thirty-five years of age; and for some reason unknown to me, I was ordered to take the row next to his. The overseer with his whip in his hand walked about the field after us, to see that our work was well done. As we worked with hoes, I had no difficulty in learning how the work was to be performed. [. . .] The overseer had bread, butter, cold ham, and coffee for his breakfast. Ours was composed of a corn cake, weighing about three quarters of a pound to each person, with as much water as was desired. I at first supposed that this bread was dealt out to the people as their allowance; but on further inquiry I found this not to be the case. Simon, by whose side I was now at work, and who seemed much pleased with my agility and diligence in my duty, told me that here, as well as every where in this country, each person received a peck of corn at the crib door, every Sunday evening, and that in ordinary times, every one had to grind this corn and bake it, for him or herself, making such use of it as the owner thought proper; but that for some time past, the overseer, for the purpose of saving the time which had been lost in baking the bread, had made it the duty of an old woman, who was not capable of doing much work in the field, to stay at the quarter, and bake the bread of the whole gang. When baked, it was brought to the field in a cart, as I saw, and dealt out in loaves.

They still had to grind their own corn, after night. [. . .] We worked in this field all day; and at the end of every hour, or hour and a quarter, we had permission to go to the cart, which was moved about the field, so as to be near us, and get water.

Our dinner was the same, in all respects, as our breakfast, except

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that, in addition to the bread, we had a little salt, and a radish for each person. We were not allowed to rest at either breakfast or dinner, longer than while we were eating; and we worked in the evening as long as we could distinguish the weeds from the cotton plants. [...] When we could no longer see to work, the horn was again sounded, and we returned home. I had now lived through one of the days—a succession of which make up the life of a slave—on a cotton plantation.

[In August, they turned from cultivating cotton to picking it, which was—after the invention on the cotton gin in 1791—the part of the production process which slowed down everything else, the bottleneck. So enslavers pushed people to pick as much cotton as they could, and Ball tells us part of how they did that.]

This business of picking cotton, constitutes about half the labour of the year, on a large plantation. In Carolina, it is generally commenced about the first of September; though in some years, much cotton is picked in August. The manner of doing the work is this. The cotton being planted in hills, in straight rows, from four to five feet apart, each hand or picker, provided with a bag, made of cotton bagging, holding a bushel or more, hung round the neck, with cords, proceeds from one side of the field to the other between two of these rows, picking all the cotton from the open burs, on the right and left, as he goes. It is the business of the picker to take all the cotton from each of the rows, as far as the lines of the rows or hills. In this way he picks half the cotton from each of the rows, and the pickers who come on his right and left, take the remainder from the opposite sides of the rows.

The cotton is gathered into the bag, and when it becomes burdensome by its weight, it is deposited in some convenient place, until night, when it is taken home, either in a large bag or basket, and weighed under the inspection of the overseer. A day's work is not estimated by the number of hills, or rows, that are picked in the day, but by the number of pounds of cotton in the seed, that the picker brings into the cotton house, at night.

[. . .] The picking of cotton, continues from August until December, or January; and in some fields, they pick from the old plants, until they are ploughed up in February or March, to make room for the planting of the seeds of another crop. [. . .] When his or her cotton is weighed at the cotton-house, in the evening, it is found that the standard quantity has not been picked, the delinquent picker is sure to receive a whipping.

On some estates, settlements are made every evening, and the whipping follows immediately; on others, the whipping does not occur until the next morning, whilst on a few plantations, the accounts are closed twice, or three times a week. [. . .] A short day's work was always punished.

I now entered upon a new scene of life. My true value had not yet been ascertained by my present owner. [. . .] It requires some time to enable a stranger, or new hand, to acquire the sleight of picking cotton.

I had ascertained, that at the hoe, the spade, [or] the axe, [. . .] I was a full match for the best hands on the plantation; but soon discovered, when we came to the picking of cotton, that I was not equal to a boy of twelve or fifteen years of age. I worked hard the first day, and made every effort to sustain the character that I had acquired, amongst my companions, but when evening came, and our cotton was weighed, I had only thirty-eight pounds, and was vexed to see that two younger men, about my own age, had, one fifty-eight, and the other fifty-nine pounds. This was our first day's work; and the overseer had not yet settled the amount of a day's picking. It was necessary for him to ascertain, by the experience of a few days, how much the best hands could pick in a day, before he established the standard of the season. I hung down my head, and felt very much ashamed of myself, when I found that my cotton was so far behind that of many, even of the women, who had heretofore regarded me as the strongest and most powerful man of the whole gang.

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the picking of cotton seemed to be so very simple a business, I felt apprehensive that I should never be able to improve myself, so far as to become even a second rate hand. [. . .] I knew that the lash of the overseer would soon become familiar with my back, if I did not perform as much work as any of the other young men.

[. . .] When it was all weighed, the overseer came to me where I stood, and told me to show him my hands. When I had done this, and he had looked at them, he observed—"You have a pair of good hands—you will make a good picker." This faint praise of the overseer revived my spirits greatly, and I went home with a lighter heart than I had expected to possess, before the termination of cotton-picking.

When I came to get my cotton weighed, on the evening of the second day, I was rejoiced to find that I had forty-six pounds, although I had not worked harder than I did the first day. On the third evening I had fifty-two pounds; and before the end of the week, there were only three hands in the field—two men and a young woman—who could pick more cotton in a day, than I could.

[. . .] Picking of cotton may almost be reckoned among the arts. A man who has arrived at the age of twenty-five, before he sees a cotton field, will never, in the language of the overseer, become a crack picker.

By great industry and vigilance, I was able, at the end of a month, to return every evening a few pounds over the daily rate [. . .] but the business of picking cotton was an irksome, and fatiguing labour to me, and one to which I could never become thoroughly reconciled; for the reason, I believe, that in every other kind of work in which I was engaged in the south, I was able to acquire the character of a first rate hand; whilst in picking cotton, I was hardly regarded as a prime hand.

[Most enslavers kept a cotton-picking ledger, in which they recorded the number of pounds that each slave picked. Those who failed to meet the quota were whipped, as Ball details. Those who did, as other former slaves report, often found their quotas raised.]

Questions

1. Can you name three innovations described by Ball that made the production of cotton more efficient over time?
2. Adam Smith argues that labor can become more efficient with the addition of machines or through the division of labor. Are either of these methods happening in the cotton-production process that Ball learned about first-hand?
3. Would the use of wage labor have made cotton-picking more or less efficient?