Slave Owners

Overview:
When people study slavery in the United States, they often wonder, "How could slave owners justify their choice to hold other humans in bondage? What could make them do such a horrible thing?" These questions are important and the answers are complex. Slave owners used many reasons to make their choices seem acceptable to society at large, and to themselves.

In looking for answers we might simply say that slave owners were "bad people" too cruel to think that slavery was wrong. There is historical support for this explanation, considering the many stories of slave masters abuse and torture of slaves. At the same time, there have been many examples of extreme cruelty in history that do not involve slaves and masters, or even people of different ancestry. Cruelty alone does not seem to explain the unique experience of slaves in the United States.

Another explanation for slavery is racism. This builds on the "bad people" explanation by being more specific about the "badness" of slave owners-they were not just cruel, but practiced their cruelty on people of African ancestry. There is a lot of historical support for this explanation, but there are many stories that complicate such an explanation. For example, we know that there were African-Americans who enslaved other African-Americans, most commonly in Louisiana. There are also examples of Native Americans holding African-American slaves. So racism alone cannot explain slavery's existence.

Yet another explanation for slavery is greed. In

To The Hon. Col. Williams,

Sir, I apologize for not responding sooner to your letter. I have been traveling recently, collecting information for an expanded edition of my book. Your suggestions to look for new sources of information on the justness of slavery inspired me. My time is short, so I will only sketch for you the ideas that I have developed.

I have learned most from the area of political economy. I have studied the governments of African countries and found that all are very poorly run. None have been able to see the light of democracy and few have more than a simple tribal organization. This supports the view that Africans cannot be fit to rule themselves. After all, if they cannot lead themselves in Africa, how could they possibly manage it here?

I have also looked into the working conditions of free laborers in the North. You will not be surprised when I say that our Negroes live better than most factory workers. Does anyone lookout for the poor worker whose arm is permanently damaged? No. Does anyone see that workers are properly fed and housed? Again, the answer is no. I think that if our slaves saw what awaits them in Northern factory life, they would never wish to set foot north of Maryland.

While I am on the subject of the north, I have found that their textile industry shows just how much they need slave labor for their own benefit. We both know that the mills of New England would shudder to a halt without our cotton. And I wonder how they would respond if we suddenly asked
this case we might say that slave owners were driven mostly by the desire for wealth and power. This too seems to make sense. Historians know that the profits from slavery were large, often as large as the profits made by factories in the North. Furthermore, slave owners held almost every position of political power in the South, as well as important jobs in the Federal government. For example, other than John Adams and John Quincy Adams, every President in the first forty-five years of our nations existence was a slaveholder.

To help us understand how slave owners justified holding other humans in bondage we have the chance to read a series of letters between two fictional slave owners. What follows is an imaginary exchange of letters between a plantation owner and small-scale slave owner. The letters show slave owners justifying their actions.

Every quotation within each fictional letter is drawn from the actual writing of an actual person who lived in the early 19th century. For example, one letter refers to John C. Calhoun, who was a United States Senator from 1832-1843 and from 1845-1850. The biographical details about each person quoted are also true. Their words are harsh, direct and often disturbing. The opinions of the fictional letter writers are also disturbing, but they are written to show you how slave owners spoke and thought about their slaves. Finally, it is important to know that throughout the 1700s, many American slave owners had seen slavery as a "necessary evil." What these letters show is a new, more vicious view of slavery emerging. The fact that beliefs about right and wrong can change so quickly should make us all pay close attention to the values that are changing today. They will influence our future, for the better or for them to pay twice as much for raw cotton. That is what would happen if the abolitionists had their way. Wouldn't it be ironic if the people who oppose slavery found themselves without shirts and pants as a result of their success? It seems hypocritical of Northerners to oppose slavery and, at the same time, treat their workers poorly and push us to keep our cotton cheap.

I hope these ideas meet with your approval. Yet I must add one observation. I found your remarks about whipping your slaves upsetting. Are we not Christians? Should we not lead by example, and not by heartless calculation? I beg your pardon, but I think that small slave holdings are superior to plantations in a number of ways. I know my slaves personally, and thus am able to teach them proper piety and virtue. I use the whip only as a last resort, because I must face my slaves each day and work along side them. The distance of the plantation seems to leave the slaves further from our good influence and too much in the company of their own. It lets you use the lash too freely. I am sure, Sir, that you take care to avoid these problems, but I fear that others do not possess your sense of responsibility.

I look forward to your response on these matters, and would appreciate it if you would do me the honor of your reading the first draft of my new book. A mind as developed as yours would be a welcome addition indeed.

Warmest Regards,

Simon Elkins

Postscript
These letters show that slave owners used science, the Bible, and what they thought was objective
the worse.

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**The Letters**

*Sept. 5, 1848*

To the Hon. Col. Williams,

Sir, I cannot thank you enough for generously lending me two of your slaves. Casius and Claudius were hard workers and behaved well too. However, I found that I could not understand much of what they said. I relied on my own Negroes to make sense of their speech. They seemed to understand me only with great effort. Are they dim witted? In any case, my two Negroes have benefited from seeing just how productive plantation slaves can be.

With the help of your Negroes all the cotton I feared would spoil will now be sent to Charleston in time to fetch the best price. To show my appreciation of your help I have sent you a copy of my new book on the physical and mental characteristics of Africans. I think you will find my ideas well researched and supported by today's science. Of course I have also included the ten dollars rental fee we agreed upon.

Humbly Yours,

Dr. Simon Elkins

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*Sept. 21, 1848*

To Dr. Elkins,

Sir, I received your payment and generous gift. I observation to justify slavery. They also show that slave owners did not treat their slaves in exactly the same way.

Today the views of "scientific racism" which appear above are very rare within the academic world. Those ideas have been disproven again and again over the past hundred years, though a very small minority of scientists still think that race and intelligence are related. All the scientific bases for racial hierarchy have been discredited.

It is important to know that, during the 19th century, opponents of slavery had arguments to contradict each claim made in support of slavery. European-American and African-American opponents of slavery made these rebuttals using philosophy, history, and religion. Sometimes they even used the same sources, like the Bible, to draw conclusions that directly contradicted the slave owners.

Whatever the arguments, the debate over slavery was itself changing in the 19th century. Slavery had been practiced for thousands of years, while widespread opposition to slavery was little more than forty years old when abolitionism took root in the United States during the 1830s. The opponents of slavery drew many of their ideas from the Enlightenment, a relatively recent intellectual movement. In this way critics of slavery were bringing new ideas to their society. The resistance they met can be understood in part as the weight of tradition pushing back on new ideas of the day.

These letters show that the answer to our question, "how could slave owners hold slaves," is complicated. Not all slave owners had the same reasons for holding slaves, though most agreed on a number of points. Given this complex history, a
have read it and found it to be most interesting reading. But before I comment on your book, let me answer your questions about the Negroes I lent you. My answer may have some use to your further research.

As you know my plantation has some hundred and sixty slaves. They live in their own quarters. The field slaves work under my overseer, Mr. Thomas, from dawn to dusk every day except Sunday. They have the evenings to themselves. Because work must take top priority, the field slaves are not instructed in proper speech. They keep much of their African accents and never learn English properly. This I think explains your difficulty understanding them. They are no more dimwitted than any other African. This leads me to comment on your fine book.

I found that your book confirmed my experience working with slaves. I think that your are right, Africans do seem made to be slaves. Their coarse manners and slow wits show that they need our guidance to help civilize them and show them the way to proper morality and religion. I recently heard a speech from Senator Calhoun who observed that, "The African is incapable of self-care and sinks into lunacy under the burden of freedom. It is a mercy to him to give him the guardianship and protection from mental death."

On a different note, I was surprised that you drew so little evidence from the Bible. After all it is written that slaves should always obey their masters, as we are to obey God. In addition, why did you not mention how science supports slavery? Are you unaware of Professor Thomas Drew's work? In his research at the University of Virginia he has claimed that, "It is as much in the order of nature that men should enslave each other as that other animals should prey upon each other." This is a minor point though. Overall, number of questions arise from the letters above. What do they say about human nature? Do humans always try to exploit groups who seem different and are less powerful? Were slave owners 100% evil? Did any of the slave owner's arguments make any sense? Which one made the least sense to you? Which made the most sense? Are any of these arguments used today to justify inequality among people?

1 There are many collections of primary sources that allow students to read the actual words of participants in the debate over slavery. Particularly useful are William Dudley, ed., Slavery: Opposing Viewpoints, Greenhaven Press, 1992, and David Shi and Holly Mayer, For the Record, W.W. Norton, 1999. Writings from the men quoted in the fictional letters can be found in these volumes.
I found your book to be very informative indeed.

Finally, I was pleased to hear that my laborers made such quick work of your harvest. I was not surprised however. They are an example of the benefits of holding slaves in larger numbers. We plantation owners are able to have work done more efficiently than small-scale owners like yourself. We do not have the inconvenience of living in close contact with our slaves. Because of that greater social distance, I can use the whip much more freely to get the most out of each worker. By whipping each slave once a year, I can be sure that each one sees at least a whipping a week. This helps keep them at their work. As a friend and a fellow man of learning, I await your reply.

Yours,

Colonel John R. Williams

Article found at http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/teachers/readings7.html