Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause

Land, Farms, Slavery and the Louisiana Purchase

Roger G. Kennedy

MR. JEFFERSON'S LOST CAUSE

How much better to have every 160 acres settled by an able-bodied militia man, than by purchasers with their hordes of Negroes, to add weakness instead of strength.

—Thomas Jefferson to Albert Gallatin,
December 24, 1807

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Once again, for Frances

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Chronology

1743	Thomas Jefferson born.
1748–49	The Baron Carondelet and James Madison born.
1750	Alexander McGillivray born.
1752–54	Andrew Ellicott born.
1756–57	Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and James Wilkinson born.
1758–59	James Monroe and William Thornton born.
1763	William Augustus Bowles born.
1767–68	Dolley Madison and Andrew Jackson born.
1783	The United States is recognized as an independent nation by the European powers. The Creeks protest its boundaries as declared by the Treaty of Paris.
1786–87	Luis Aury and Gregor MacGregor born.
	William Augustus Bowles and Philip Nolan gather at the plantation of Alexander McGillivray.
1791	Bowles declares himself Director General of the Muskogean Republic; Nolan makes his first exploration of Texas.
1792	Bowles kidnaped for the first time, shipped off to Manila.
1794	Neutrality Act.
1796	John Adams elected President.
1795	Pinckney's Treaty with Spain.
1800	Spanish government marks Bowles for death.
	Jefferson elected President, agrees with Napoleon to seek elimination of Toussaint and restoration of slavery to Haiti.
1802	New French invasion of Haiti begins.
	Lewis and Clark begin their expedition to the Pacific.

1803 Louisiana Purchase.

Jefferson enters alliance with Spanish authorities to have Bowles eliminated; Bowles kidnapped in June, to die in prison in 1805.

1804 Vice President Aaron Burr kills Alexander Hamilton in a duel and makes a reconnaissance of East Florida.

Dunbar and Hunter probe of the Ouachita Valley.

The Kempers assert the first Republic of West Florida.

1805 Panton, Leslie, and Forbes ("The Firm," to include their successors as partners) arrange Cherokee and Choctaw cessions to the United States.

Wilkinson's soldiers make first probe at Spanish posts on the Sabine.

September: Kemper Outrage.

1806 The Firm arranges Chickasaw cession to the United States.

July: Freeman and Custis withdraw down the Red River after confrontation with the Spanish army.

October 29 to November 4: Wilkinson negotiates Sabine Convention and turns on Aaron Burr.

1808 Jefferson's Embargo Act.

Joseph Bonaparte set upon the Spanish throne.

James Madison elected President.

1810 September 16: Father Hidalgo proclaims Mexican independence.

September 23: West Florida rebels take Baton Rouge.

October 27: President Madison issues order putting down West Florida Rebellion and acquiring Baton Rouge District.

1811 The *Cortes* in Cadiz announces intention to abolish slavery in the Spanish possessions.

December: American armed forces occupy the Gulf Coast of the present states of Louisiana and Mississippi. Governor Claiborne claims all Gulf Coast of present Alabama except town of Mobile (claim repeated by Governor Holmes in 1812).

1812 January: Invasion of East Florida begins, but in May Monroe disavows George Mathews and the East Florida "Patriots."

June: American declaration of war against Great Britain.

"The Firm" turns finally to the Americans.

1813 April: Wilkinson occupies Mobile.

1814 Andrew Jackson completes his Creek War and makes his first invasion of East Florida.

1816 Gaines's attack on Negro Fort.

James Monroe elected President.

1817 June: Gregor MacGregor captures Amelia Island.

1818 Aury replaces MacGregor; Gaines orders Bankhead to seize Amelia Island.

Andrew Jackson invades Florida.

1819 Adams-Onis Treaty solemnizes Jackson's conquest of Florida.

1824 John Quincy Adams elected President.

1828 Andrew Jackson elected President.

1836 Texas declares its independence from Mexico.

1845 Texas merged into the United States. Florida also admitted as a slave state.

1861 The South, including Florida and Texas, seeks to secede from the Union.

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MR. JEFFERSON'S LOST CAUSE

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PART ONE

The Land and Mr. Jefferson

The land is where we live and where the consequences of our presence accumulate, determining what else we can do, and what we can no longer do. The land is thus the book of our lives. Each day we write upon it new pages, some splendid, some sordid, informing our progeny of the truth about us whatever we may write elsewhere.

The book of printed pages you hold calls attention to a chapter in the book of the American land, written between 1776 and 1826. Choices were made by those controlling the government of the United States, and the governments of its territories and states, determining whether or not slavery would be permitted within their boundaries. In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the extent of the territory conceded by the European powers to lie within the United States; through arrangements made as part of that acquisition, slavery was given fresh encouragement in Louisiana and permitted to expand up the Mississippi Valley. A momentum of events began, eventuating in 1861 in an attempted division of the Union by slave owners, slave sellers, and those they could convince to follow their lead. They so detested the prospect of restriction upon the continued spread of their system of forced labor that they sought to take the states they controlled out of the United States.

They had been threatening to do so since the 1780s. They had raised the specter of disunion to have their way when the nation was placed under constitutional government in 1787, when the Southwest Territories were chartered in 1787–89, when Kentucky adopted its constitution in 1792, and when Mississippi Territory was organized in 1802.*

*No real effort was made to press plantations into the Northwest Territories, as we shall see.

From 1784 through 1804, as each new area was opened to slavery, eloquent men and women argued that keeping people in bondage was inconsistent with the nation's founding documents. In 1805, the necessity to organize the domain purchased in 1803 from Napoleon detonated a two-year debate as to how land-use and labor-use might also determine civil society. The contention increased in ferocity as portions of the Purchase became the slave states of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri. Their admission took place before the death of Jefferson in 1826.

Until then he had remained the predominant political figure in the nation. In a series of great papers written before 1784, he had expressed in radiant language his aversion to slavery and his preference for a republic of free and independent farmers, offering proposals whereby a virtuous republic might wisely dispose of its public lands and encourage a benign labor system on those lands. In his later years he was fully informed of the choices being made but interposed no public objection as his edifice of dreams was systematically reduced to rubble. He could not escape full knowledge of the consequences for the land itself of each decision. During his own presidency (1801–9) great plantations worked by slaves engrossed more and more of the choicest portions of a quarter of a continent. He was aware of that outcome. Therefore this is a tragic story.

The tragedy was, of course, larger than the disappointment of a single man. It was a national one: the nation as a whole had it within its power, over and over again, to stop its decline into civil war.

Though responsibility for these outcomes lay with the entire nation, it fell most heavily upon the planters of Virginia led by Jefferson. They held the predominant power in the nation. Virginia was the most populous and the most extensive of all the states. George Washington, Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, all drawn from Virginia's planter class, held the presidency from 1789 until 1825, except for the single term of John Adams. As new domains were acquired by purchases and wars from the Indian nations, from France, and from Spain, the preferences most affecting the allocation of that land were those of owners of large plantations worked by many slaves. The great planters saw to it that the choicest property went into the hands of people such as themselves rather than to family farmers.

These were all political decisions made by narrow majorities. Each could have been tipped to another outcome. None was inevitable. Few political choices are when great moral questions are manifestly at stake. When in these pages there is discussion of economic trends and objectives, illustrated by schedules of statistics, and when climate, soil, wind, and rain come into our discourse, they are offered to show why some decisions were easier than others, not that any were foreordained.

Here in brief are the themes of this work: none of the choices to expand the domain of slavery went uncontested within the councils of government

and on the ground itself. As these decisions were made, the contestants on both sides understood that the alternative labor system to slavery was family farming. And each of the choices between planters and family farmers left effects upon the land itself, ordaining its future and that of the people of the South.

The Louisiana Purchase is the central event in this story. Thomas Jefferson is its central character.

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I

Choices and Consequences

Thomas Jefferson was a greatly gifted teacher, but he failed to bring about the social transformation he laid before his nation of students as their great opportunity. He proclaimed two revolutions, one political and the other social. He had little to do with achieving the first and drew back from the second. He could start things but had difficulty finishing them.

He lived in a real place, in a real time, amid real people. He was not completely free to do what he liked. It is possible to determine how much freedom of action he had, and at the same time to begin assessing the effects of his action and inaction, by taking him home to Monticello. We know a great deal about the daily realities of his situation from his notebooks, and more from the accounts of a parade of visitors. Mrs. Anna Maria Thornton was one of the most acute of those observers. Coming to the scene with eyes trained as the wife of an architect and plantation owner, she was conscious of both house and land. As Jefferson's friend, she knew that when he was at home he was amid circumstances he could manage, unlike the ebullient and contentious nation he sought to lead.

The house at Monticello was his own creation, and so, to a remarkable extent, was its setting. He had shaped the mountaintop on which he situated it. In the next few pages we will follow the account in Mrs. Thornton's diary of a visit in 1802, seeking to get as close as we can to the man and the ground—in the rain. Rain is important in this story.

September is a hot month in Charlottesville, though the grip of the summer heat is being loosened by afternoon rains, some of them ferocious. When an especially severe storm is gathering power, giant clouds rear up on the horizon, sending forth red-gold flashes of lightning. The atmosphere becomes thicker and heavier, as if an invisible advance guard of those giants were stalking about pressing down their hands on human shoulders.

On one such afternoon in September 1802, Mrs. Dolley Madison, the wife of Secretary of State James Madison, and Dr. and Mrs. William Thornton drove from Mrs. Madison's plantation at Montpelier to visit President

Thomas Jefferson on his mountain at Monticello. It too was a plantation headquarters, though the mountain itself was reserved for gardens, buildings, and parklands, not for growing staple crops. They traveled at a leisurely pace. They had good reasons to be interested not only in the President's plans for Monticello but also in the condition of Virginia's plantation economy. They were planting families, who were traveling through a countryside that had been heavily forested less than a century earlier but was now, after heavy cultivation, showing signs of erosion and exhaustion.

Dolley Madison and Anna Maria Thornton had eyes trained to detect those signs. Though city ladies, they had married into the plantation aristocracy—the Madison plantations lay in Virginia, Thornton's in the West Indies. Both women knew Jefferson of old. In the salons of Philadelphia they had heard him discourse on government and agriculture. Now they could see him amid the latest works of his own carpenters and gardeners. (Most of his field hands were distributed through his holdings around the county and in Bedford County, to the southwest).[1]

Despite the approaching thunder and lightning, they left their carriages and walked uphill, reaching the house and a litter of debris arising from the inchoate enthusiasms of their host. Over twenty-seven years of construction and deconstruction, of putting up and tearing down, Jefferson had demonstrated how full of invention he was for systems and designs, and how irresolute in execution. His house was not yet done.[2]

From the beginning he had set out to do more than provide himself an ideal habitation. He was making symbolic and pedagogic architecture, to be set upon the flattened space presented as his slaves carted away the top of the hill. They created for him a presentation-platform. This was what the Greeks had done. They too planed off topographic irregularities to offer, uncluttered, a platform like that of the Acropolis at Athens, a *temenos.* So presented, a building could teach. For the Greeks a *temenos* set before the citizenry the statue of a god, to suggest what that god might require of men. For Jefferson the humanist, such a space gave clarity to his statements of humane ideals. Monticello was not one man's monument but one man's evocation of a set of ideals for a good society. Jefferson never built without intending to teach something.[3]

As the Thorntons and Mrs. Madison came over the top of the hill onto the *temenos*, they found the columns for the contemplated portico lying upon the ground. When the doors were opened to them by Mr. Jefferson's slaves, they entered what was to become a balconied entrance hall but was still a husk of raw brick. The rain beat on the boards covering the spaces reserved for windows. A single lamp showed a ceiling still unplastered and a floor still made of planks not yet nailed in place. Though she was prepared for the house to be a little "unfinished," Mrs. Thornton later wrote in her diary,

"the general gloom" unsettled her. There was, however, consolation: tea was laid in the parlor. Soon the President was presiding. He often started a discussion by referring to the portraits of philosophers and statesmen on the parlor wall.[4]

Mr. Jefferson "has altered his plan so frequently," Mrs. Thornton observed—his habit in many circumstances—having "pulled down and built, that in many parts . . . [his villa] looks like a house going to decay from the length of time it has been created." After she had left Monticello she thought back on her experience of that stormy night, of the plans-perpetually-in-progress in the midst of a ravaged countryside, and concluded that "there is something rather grand and awful, than agreeable or convenient in the whole place." There was, and continued to be, as after twenty more years the house became better and the land below worse.[5]

Rain in Virginia and Its Results

Jefferson wrote that after a storm he was wont to gaze eastward from his portico upon "mountains, forests, rocks, rivers" as the clouds parted before the sun. There on the mountaintop "we ride above the storms! How sublime to look down into the workhouse of nature." Yet in that workhouse of nature, the rainwater was still coursing down plowed ruts running up and down the tobacco-planted hillsides—that was the way the slaves plowed. Each rain widened the plow-scratches into gullies, and the next rain made the gullies into trenches.

A century earlier, when the hillsides were forested, the leaves of the trees had broken the impact of rainfall, so that it reached the ground diffused and found there a resilient and spongy mat of roots and humus. But in order to have fields to plow and plant, the planters had sent forth their crews of slaves to girdle and fell the trees and to rip away the matting with their plows. The hills were scalped and then sliced. There was not much topsoil to begin with; one planter said his had been "about as thick over the clay as the hide of an ox" and much easier to tear away. Thomas Mann Randolph, Jefferson's kinsman, was already urging contour plowing, and both Jefferson and George Washington were experimenting with heavier plows that might cut into the hardpan below the topsoil and hold a contour more firmly, yet because Virginia is a land of downpours, not of drizzles, shallow contours proved to be of small greater defensive value. After each little ridge filled to bursting, the impounded water rushed even more fiercely downhill. The streams of the Piedmont became tobacco-colored, and when they reached the Chesapeake Bay full of silt they filled the little harbors of tobacco ports such as Dumfries and Port Tobacco, while upstream "thousands of acres . . . [were left] derelict."[6]

The countryside through which the Thorntons drove toward Monticello was a "broad plain-like surface with rolling uplands everywhere cut by narrow river valleys—a lay of the land that is particularly subjected to destructive washing even under moderate rainfall." This was the "red and hilly" country Jefferson described to his French friends as "like much of the country of Champagne and Burgundy, on the route of Sens, . . . Dijon, and along the Côte to Chagny, excellently adapted to wheat, maize, and clover." But by 1790 it was no longer excellent. Much of it had washed downstream, and more was to go.[7]

The rainfall was not "moderate"; this was not France. Though only fifty to seventy inches a year might fall upon Monticello, it came in such violent bursts that it rushed to the rivers. We have no precise statistics of the volume of silt it carried in the eighteenth century, but it is likely that it was even greater than it was in the mid-twentieth, when, after much reforestation, the Potomac flooded down from such a bare watershed that half the rain falling upon it was not absorbed—and still is not. Down it goes into Chesapeake Bay, at 220,000 feet per second in spring flood (the low-water rate is about a thousand), carrying "a total of over 400 pounds of soil from every acre in its drainage basin." In 1950, the Shenandoah ranged from 380 feet per second in quiet times to 140,000 in flood; the James, from 600 feet to 97,800. When the water is high they flow as conduits of silt.[8]

The view from Monticello which seemed to be so splendid to Jefferson extends across uplands drained by the headwaters of the James, which "at a ten-foot flood crest," it was reported in 1950, "removes from 275,000 to 300,000 cubic yards of solid material during each twenty-four hours, and annually carries away between three and four million tons of material." The great storms of 1667, 1685, and 1771 caused the river to rise forty feet, conveying the topsoil of several counties into the bay. Nothing worse seemed possible. In 1790, however, Jefferson wrote of "such rains as never came . . . since Noah's flood." The relentless planting of tobacco in a wasteful system had produced great fortunes for the planters, but Jefferson now despaired that years of "clear profits will not repay the damage done to the lands." His home county was described that year as "a scene of desolation . . . farm after farm worn out, washed and gullied, so that scarcely an acre could be found in a place fit for cultivation."[9]

Lessons for Yeomen

Jefferson managed to support his old age by selling slaves to the West, after, in the words of Donald Meinig, the great political geographer of our own time, "the relentless cropping of the rolling red hills . . . brought ruin to the older districts of the Piedmont." The two counties, Albemarle and Bedford,

in which he owned plantations were so thin-soiled, so roughly treated, and so frequently stricken by "heavy summer downpours" that by the time of his death they had become "a perfect waste . . . washed into gullies . . . 3 or 4 feet deep." A century later, in the Depression years of the twentieth century, they were two of the five counties in Virginia designated as most needy of restoration by the federal government. Meinig was born in those Depression years and described the Piedmont as having suffered from "the common attitude toward soils [, which] was the same as that toward the great forests and the vast flocks and herds of wildlife: they were nature's riches to be plundered by those lucky enough to get there first. When they were exhausted or unbalanced, the most common American response . . . was to pack up and move on to fresh ground in the West."[10]

The "fresh ground" was there, and still fresh because those who had actually gotten there first had left it *unexhausted* and *balanced*, and they could be dispossessed of it. We will come to how that was done, but before we wave them away we owe them a pause to recall that they had been farming thin soils under heavy rains for a long time. They had domesticated wild plants on what a thousand years later seemed to be "fresh ground." They knew how to sustain its yields without dismantling villages and moving along at anything approaching a tenth of the rate common among the planters of the nineteenth century. They treated land as if it were not cheap. They had to do the work of sustaining it themselves. In economic terms, they had many of the same disincentives to waste that were felt by yeomen farmers. That too is a point to be amplified later. We are here distinguishing the land uses characteristic of various classes among the successors to the Indians, taking note that yeomen among the European-Americans adopted more salutary conservation practices from Indians than did planters because yeomen and Indians had more in common than planters and Indians.

Rains came, whatever humans might do. If crops were to be grown, it would fall upon ground from which the shelter of trees had been removed (to some extent) and from which the sod and compost had also been removed (to some extent). Indians, and many yeomen, were tacticians rather than strategists; they dealt with the little picture. They did not have to apply general rules to vast stretches of territory so that crews of slaves could march across the scene with minimum instruction. They often farmed as if the plot before them was the last they could expect to obtain. So they left some trees in place, the largest and shadiest, the hardest to girdle and fell. Yeomen obtained metal plows as planters did, but because plows were expensive they often followed Indian example where they could, poking the earth and planting messily amid stumpage, thus doing less damage to the poultice of leaves and roots and exposing the soil beneath less perilously to erosion. Like Indians, many yeomen planted in little hillocks, amid the trees, rather than in rows stretching across denuded fields.

Pasteur, Wilson, and the Three Sisters

They might have done so two centuries later out of scientific sophistication, but folk wisdom had anticipated science. Eighteenth-century people knew that erosion washed away nutritive soil in suspension and also washed away nutrients in solution. Since the gap between what they knew and what we think we know now has been filled in stages, for a time that statement could be made without calling to the imagination little victims of erosion struggling to escape the fatal waters. In recent years, however, biological science has animated the scene of flood. We no longer talk of "nutrients" as if they were inert chemicals. There are living organisms among those nutrients, and the practices of Indians and yeomen were kinder to them—unintentionally but effectively—than those of great planters.

White subsistence farmers occupied an intermediate region still often called a frontier, though lacking the precision of a "line of occupation" or boundary. It was not continuous, and great areas of mixed populations remained well behind the farthest advances of the plantation system, in what planters regarded as less desirable land. There agriculture was conducted by people without much capital and (generally speaking) with their own labor, adapting to the demonstrable advantages of the practices of Indians similarly situated. In an intermediate culture they operated their farms otherwise than would overseers managing plantations, who worked slaves to exploit the land rapidly to produce staple crops for international markets.

Indians did not move unless they had to. They learned over millennia that they could stay put longer if they avoided planting a single crop alone or for many planting seasons. They made a practice of combining plants, such as corn, beans, and squash, letting the broad leaves of squash shelter corn roots from the sun and setting beans to grow up corn stalks. Nations as diverse as the Navajo and the Iroquois had stories about these Three Sisters and other associative and symbiotic plants. Observation—the basis of science—showed that corn, beans, and squash reinforced each other's nutritive value in the pot and also enhanced each other's growth in the field.

But each plant had to be set separately, and symbiotically. Few planters and overseers trusted slaves to do such complex tasks, and, besides, they could afford to abandon what they impoverished. However, the Three Sisters were welcome on the family farm. Why was this such a good strategy? Because it anticipated the research of Louis Pasteur and E. O. Wilson. Pasteur was three years old in the year of Jefferson's death. Before he himself died at the onset of the twentieth century, he had taught mankind about little organisms. We associate Pasteur with pasteurized milk, antibacterials, and germs, but agriculture owes a lot to him, to his microscope, and to Wilson's world of tiny living things. Wilson has taught us about the vitality and complexity of each handful of soil. Each is an ecosystem, wriggling and throbbing with lives—little lives, but lives.

A farm, whether cultivated by an Indian or a yeoman or a planter's slaves, is a congeries of microscopic jungles. Each may remain in productive balance until humans introduce exotics into it—such as a corn plant. If many corn plants are introduced, and favored by the farmer season after season, corn-loving organisms will proliferate at the expense of others. The jungle will grow sick. Cotton, tobacco, corn (or beans, or squash) set out alone year after year will "deplete" the soil of some nutrients—those that plant consumes most voraciously—and will also stimulate the crowding out of a diversity of organisms by that set which thrives with the dominant plant. Rebalancing will then require adding back lost nutrients and inserting other organisms, some as small as the inhabitants of manure and some as large as other plants. Thus rotation and restoration are different yet complementary. A preference for staying put—which anthropologists call "sedentism"—may arise from necessity or from love of the land. In either case the consequences will be governed by the laws of Dr. Wilson's jungle.

Indians moved too, when trees or game or soil was exhausted. There are no comprehensive comparable statistics, but it is a good guess that their villages in the Southeast shifted location less frequently than did slave-worked plantations, because Indian agriculture was less intrusive and destructive. So was that of white yeomen. One reason why human responses to soil depletion and sickness accelerated in the plantation system is that fire, used as a tool by all these cultures, had more profoundly deleterious effects in the hands of the planters. When fire was used together with row crops, sod-busting plows, staple crops grown without siblings, and a refusal to rest the land by rotation, it did less good and more harm. Fire lays upon the surface nutrients such as phosphorous and calcium previously stored in tree trunks, branches, leaves, and roots, as if they had been pumped there. When the soil is deep and has many nutrients to pump up, or is restored with new nutrients, it may produce crops for a long time, and fire can be brought back to do its pumping repeatedly. But that will not work if the land has been deeply depleted and eroded. As it was, fire was a sign of the advance of planters moving successively through the forests, scarcely pausing in the process—slash, burn, grow, move, slash again, burn again, grow again, move again.[11]

Yeomen, Planters, and the Land

The observation that yeomen were gentler to the land than planters is simple reporting, as supported by economic analysis. It has no moral overtones as to the preferences of yeomen, though, of course, it leads to moral conclusions as to what the welfare of the land may require of public policy. One can reach those conclusions without any commitment to the view that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen

people." Not only can we rely upon a multitude of contemporary testimonials, but we can confirm those by expectations grounded in economic analysis, without requiring "peculiar . . . virtue . . . [in] those, who . . . [worked] their own soil."[12]

The great planters won the West at second hand, appearing on the scene only after armies had swept it of its Indian defenders. Small farmers had no armies to deploy; they did their own fighting, as they did their own clearing and farm work. A yeoman would, therefore, naturally make a calculation differing from that of a planter with friends in the government, assessing in his own way the costs and benefits of staying and replenishing, as against ripping through a piece of property and moving on. A planter might never go near the frontier—Jefferson did not, nor Madison. The man who could afford to buy land in bulk and place upon it a labor force of slaves made a calculus of staying or moving different from that of a farmer for whom moving might bring death either by Indians or by a tree falling in the wrong direction when he set an axe to it.[13]

A second difference between these two sets of calculations emerged from the stock pen. A yeoman could add organic fertilizer to his fields because he had plenty of manure conveniently at hand, having collected it from the small enclosures where cows were kept to be milked or to provide beef for the family. The family farmer might grow crops for the market, but first he had "to provide food for the family and feed for the milk cow and his work stock." Thus a larger portion of his property, acre for acre, was set aside for the family garden and for stock—and more was replenished by manure—than was the case on a plantation. The family farmer, by manuring, returned more to the earth than the plantation owner, who devoted every acre he could to his cash crop and turned out the cattle to range where the staple would not grow. The family farmer grew his own food when he could, while the planter, intent on getting crops to market, would supplement food grown domestically with purchases necessary to keep slaves or mules or cattle working.[14]

The planter had money to buy new land. He also sought to get maximum return from his capital investment in slaves. So, unlike the yeoman, who lacked cash and had no slaves to keep busy, the planter bought the cheap land and kept his corps of slaves working in off-seasons. Their winter work was clearing the next summer's cropland. It might have been restoring the old, but, as Jefferson wrote, "we can buy an acre of new land cheaper than we can manure an old one."[15]

That had been true in Virginia in the 1790s and was still true a half century later in Mississippi. Land was still cheap, and slaves were still ambulatory wasting assets:

> Slaves were sent out from the headquarters plantation during slack periods of the year to clear land, build cabins, and to make the general preparations

> necessary for a gradual transfer of farming operations from the old place to the new. . . while they were squeezing the last vestiges of profit from their capital investments in older tracts. . . . With seemingly limitless tracts of fertile land available at low prices elsewhere in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and the Texas Republic, Mississippi cotton growers had but small incentive to devote time, labor or money to soil conservation.[16]

There were additional reasons why a crew of slaves was more dangerous to the land than an equal number of yeomen farming their own land. Why were they given light plows even when it became more widely known that some contour plowing might help retain rainfall and that heavier plows would make more effective contours? Because they had no reason to be solicitous of their owners' soil or machinery. A yeoman might become attached to land he had cleared and planted, where he had chosen to live, where his children had been born and his wife had toiled beside him.

If a yeoman happened to become prosperous enough to get a new piece of equipment, such as a fancy new heavy plow, he could be trusted to care for it. Why should a slave care? And from the planter's vantage point, why give him a chance to show how little he cared? One plantation owner complained that "complicated tools, implements, or machines" not destroyed deliberately by his "hands" would be wrecked out of indifference. Scientific farming "required a higher degree of supervision than . . . planters were willing or able to provide. For similar reasons, the care of livestock and the maintenance of plantation roads, fences, buildings, and farming equipment were neglected on most plantations to an extent that would be shocking to farmers of a later age."[17]

As suggested a moment ago, small farmers took better care of their own equipment and their own land because they were without the planters' means to replace it. Being poorer, they and their families did their own work, or most of it, whereas planters could hire overseers to drive their slaves for them. A class of overseers arose to permit the plantation owners to engage in more pleasant tasks and also because many planters held many scattered properties. The Hamptons, for example, farmed properties situated in county-sized units from upcountry South Carolina through Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi into Louisiana. Their overseers were compensated on the basis of crops produced and were likely to move their crews off one holding onto the next as soon as they had harvested the first large crops. They had little incentive to take a long view by investing in an old ravaged place. John Taylor of Carolina said of the typical overseer that "he is bribed . . . to impoverish the land. . . . The . . . lands suffer a thousand times more than tenant farmers would have done."[18]

As we go along, we will come to other reasons that explain why yeomen were kinder to the land than planters. We will also observe Jefferson's deepening silence on the matter.

Cheap Land and Slave Labor

Migration was *driven* by soil loss and soil sickening and *drawn* by cheap land. In the West, land was cheap because the cost of acquiring it was low. The Indians, lacking equivalent military technology to that possessed by those who came westward against them, and weakened by disease, were swept aside before they could develop prolonged coalitions or campaigns.

In the 1780s, European competition fell away as well. After two centuries, the French, British, Dutch, and Spaniards ceased to devote much energy to building empires in America. From 1720 onward they were engaged elsewhere, fighting nearly continuous world wars against each other until Napoleon was vanquished in 1815. By the end of the eighteenth century, Britain, the most dangerous among these offshore powers, was becoming more committed to trade than to conquest (except when conquest came very easily, as it did in Africa and the islands of the Pacific). Its American policy after 1783 was to develop a profitable exchange with the planters, leaving to them the costs of conquest and burdens of managing slaves. There was only one interruption of this policy, arising from the peculiar cobelligerency of the Americans with Napoleon during the War of 1812.

International demand for land no longer, therefore, much affected the overall pricing—including the maintenance of fleets and armies—of the vast domains acquired by the United States. The resulting cheapness of the price of that land had, however, immense consequences for the society that emerged within the area from which the Great Powers withdrew. The great historian of progressivism, Frederick Jackson Turner, assessed the availability of cheap land to be the defining blessing of American history. Blessing for whom? For Indians? For slaves? For the land itself? Cheap land was treated as disposable. Cheap things usually are. The descendants of free farmers who emigrated from Vermont or Pennsylvania to Iowa or Wisconsin naturally enough rejoice in the positive influence of cheap land on the frontier in American history. The slaves, however, had little to celebrate as they slogged westward. Nor did the Indians. In the presence of slavery, the frontier induced a migrant agricultural capitalism with results deadly both to humans and to the land itself.

The saga of the South was one of repulsion as well as of attraction. A widening expanse of exhausted soil—the shadow of the frontier—drove people westward while new lands drew them on. A thesis complementary to Turner's might be entitled "The Influence of What Followed the Frontier upon American History." The shadow had been there since the English colonists of Virginia planted tobacco in their parade ground and in the areas laid out for streets. Having sickened the arable soil within their stockade, they invaded the Indian fields outside. The Indians counterattacked, but English weapons and English diseases reduced their numbers, and within thirteen years the

English were able to buy slaves to do their work for them. Thereafter the shadow widened rapidly, as the slaves wasted the land. This disagreeable story, in which the responsibility lies with the colonists, was not that told by Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* and his draft of the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson's version of events was that Virginia enjoyed nearly a half century of yeoman pioneering before slavery came to define the lifestyle of the planters. Jamestown was settled by the English in 1607. In his *Notes*, Jefferson wrote that he had "found no mention of Negroes in the colony until about 1650," and writers following his lead added that "scouring tillage" emerged when black slaves became available to do the scouring. In fact, however, the slaves were there by 1620 and were instructed in the tillage their masters wanted. In his draft of the Preamble, Jefferson placed the blame for their presence upon the intervention of slave sellers managed from London with the personal complicity of the King of England. What if all this had been true? What then would have been possible after independence? Relieved of the intrusive British, freed of the incrustations left upon them by kings, clergy, and commercial corruption, the planters might more easily have restored the old order, a yeoman's Virginia. And they might also have removed the slaves. But as it was, that task, to which some of them aspired, was too much for them.[19]

Scouring tillage expanded the shadow of the frontier, leaving behind it an unstable Virginia, though that is not a topic much discussed, and the impressions in the Tidewater are all to the contrary. As is often the case, the architecture put in place by people who are insecure seeks to impart the impression of long tenure and tranquility, and much is said of old families, of first families, of family houses. A title search of most of the great plantation headquarters tells another story, one calling for compassion even for plantation owners.

Architectural historians have written much in recent decades of the "impermanent housing" characteristic of the poor farmers of the Chesapeake colonies. This had to do not necessarily with their moving a lot but, instead, with their being so poor that they built fragile structures. We do not know much about comparative sedentism among the classes in the Chesapeake, but it is useful to set aside some confusing architectural symbolism and note that impermanence was not confined to the lower classes, if we are to judge by how briefly the first families of Virginia occupied their famous plantation headquarters along the York and James rivers. Many a Virginian can recite the names associated with these red-brick, beautifully proportioned mansions, yet their builders' names did not remain very long on the mailboxes—so to speak. They were a peripatetic lot, however much their hierarchic orderings of buildings—big brick central mass descending through flankers to ever smaller outbuildings—bespoke order and repose.

Many if not most tobacco-planting families ran through the fertility of their Tidewater holdings by the end of the eighteenth century, to face bankruptcy at worst and migrancy at best—unless they had speculated successfully in western lands, reverted to mercantile life, or married a scion to a merchant's daughter. Westover was built in 1730 and sold out of the Byrd family in 1814, after several decades in which it could only be retained by transfusions of cash from Mrs. Byrd's mercantile father in Philadelphia. Carter's Grove was completed about 1753 and sold less than forty years later, as was its contemporary, Betty Washington Lewis's Kenmore. The other Lewis mansion, Woodlawn, was completed in 1802, but "by 1845," we are told by the Garden Club of Virginia, it "was neglected—no white man lived there—fences were gone—patches of barely cultivated land existed—rickety cabins housed a few slaves." Stratford, completed about 1725, bade farewell to its last Lee five years before Monticello was lost to the Jeffersons.

The expansion of the plantation system into the Piedmont repeated the Tidewater sequence. The family farmers were forced out, the land was mined out, and then the planters—many of them, at any rate—moved out to face the perils of the frontier. That was better for the independent-minded than falling into dependent status where they were. Yeoman farms were first "enlarged into plantations as numerous small farmers sold their holdings at better prices than they expected to obtain and sought homesteads in frontier states or territories. . . . [T]he result was that [during] the first quarter of the nineteenth century, many counties and parishes of the upper Tidewater and Piedmont were transformed into communities with larger average land holdings, more slaves, and fewer free persons." Then that land, too, sickened, and those planters who had squeezed enough profit out of their land to buy more in the West drove their slaves ahead of them across the Appalachians or down into the upland Carolinas and Georgia.[20]

2

Washington, Jefferson, Three Worthies, and Plantation Migrancy

In the 1790s, Arthur Young, the English agronomist, began corresponding with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the two most celebrated American planters. Young was bold enough to ask how they explained the apparent indifference of their peers to the obvious deterioration of Virginia's capital base in land. Jefferson's response was, "We can buy an acre of new land cheaper than we can manure an old one." Washington was rueful but equally blunt: plantation management, he told Young, had become a business of seeing to it that "a piece of land is cut down," meaning stripped of its timber, and then "kept under constant cultivation, first in tobacco and then in Indian corn (two very exhausting plants), until it will yield scarcely anything" at all.[1]

That was how things had gone at Mount Vernon. Washington had done all he could to reinvigorate its yellowish soil with manure, compost, and chemical fertilizers but after a time reached the conclusion that nothing would be sufficient within the slave labor system. Three years before his death in 1799, he assessed the condition of the land and the people given into his charge and proposed that his estates both in the Tidewater and in the West be turned over to family farmers. He announced that he would be willing to parcel out his property into small holdings to be worked by yeomen—he called them "*real* farmers"—and expressed a preference that they work without slaves. Anticipating the great debate of the next century, Washington wrote that "to exclude them [slaves] . . . is not among the least inducements for dividing the farms into small lots."[2]

Washington did not use the term "yeomen," redolent of Olde England, for he had no romantic illusions about the man who labors on the land. But he had observed that "real farmers" treated their farms better than slaves treated plantations. It is arresting to note that the treatment of land mattered so much to Washington. He was early in that, as in many other things. When he died, he left provision that his slaves should be freed and sustained thereafter in

their old age. That was unusual, but well within the range of possibilities open to rich, influential, and powerful men of his day—Jefferson's day.

Washington and Jefferson were not abstractions or prototypes for Arthur Young or for their slaves, exemplary though each was in his way. They were men, struggling to live moral lives. They had much in common, so much that when we set these commonalities in place we can more clearly see how they differed. They were tall, two or three inches above six feet, in their prime. They were sandy-to-red-haired, though they both grew gray. They were blue-eyed, and their skin was fair: Washington's was "clear though rather colorless pale . . . and burning red in the sun"; Jefferson's was "very clear and pure" and freckled as well as reddening. It is likely that Jefferson weighed only a little less than Washington—175 pounds in mid-life, though "his slim form and delicate fibres" probably did not gain the additional twenty-five pounds gained by Washington in old age. That poundage accumulated over the plates of massive muscles felt under his uniform by those few who dared put an arm around his shoulders. (Gouverneur Morris once took a wager to do so and regretted his affront for the rest of his life.)[3]

Jefferson and Washington were the sons of two famous athletes, even larger men than they. Augustus Washington was known as "a blond giant"; Peter Jefferson was said to be able to lift a hogshead of tobacco waist high with each hand. Those fathers died when the sons were young: Jefferson was eleven, Washington fourteen. Jefferson was not fitted for the military life and avoided it; it was not to be his route to eminence. He was often reminded that he stayed so far from the fray that he was not even Odysseus to Washington's Achilles, and in response permitted himself occasional disparaging comments upon Washington's failures in the world of the salon.

> His temper was naturally irritable and high-toned. . . . His heart was not warm in its affections. . . . [H]is colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas or fluency of words. . . . His mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong, though not as acute as that of a Newton, Bacon, or Locke, and as far as he saw, no judgement was ever sounder. He was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination.[4]

There was a portrait of Washington in Jefferson's parlor, along with Newton, Bacon, and Locke—but well below them on the wall.

Jefferson's military service was limited to logistical functions as a colonel in the Virginia militia and as a wartime governor. Washington permitted himself an occasional outburst against Jefferson's refusal to be more venturesome: "Where is Jefferson?" he asked when his troops were freezing at Valley Forge and Jefferson was snug at Monticello. Yet most of the time, apparently, Washington expected no more of the philosopher-statesman than did John Quincy Adams, who said of him that he "had not the spirit of martyrdom." Adams was