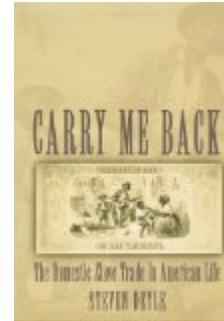


Steven Deyle. *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. x + 398 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516040-6; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-531019-1.

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Published on H-South (June, 2006)



The World the Slave Traders Made

The recent years have witnessed a cluster of scholarship surrounding the buying and selling of human beings in the American South. Historians have quantified the trade's dimensions, described it as a Second Middle Passage, explored how the commerce in human beings was central to southern white identity, examined the commodification of rape, and explained the tensions the trade created within southern society. All of these works build on the foundation established by Frederic Bancroft's matchless *Slave Trading in the Old South*. While these recent interpretations may not always agree, they do center their analyses on the antebellum South. Steven Deyle's new book, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, alters this dominant paradigm. Deyle believes that the commerce in slaves was central to American life, not just the southern identity or economy.[1]

An organized interstate slave trade in the United States can be traced to the late-eighteenth-century Chesapeake. The movement of whites away from the Atlantic littoral fueled demands for more slaves who would, among other tasks, clear fields, drain swamps, and tend to cash crops. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade provided many of these laborers and Deyle argues that Virginians recognized how this trade tamped down the prices of bondpeople on mainland North America. Influential Virginia politicians worked to close the slave trade, in part, to drive competitors out of the slave trading market and thereby increase the value of their human commodities. Politicians from the Old Dominion also led the way

in acquiring Louisiana, a region that became the eventual home to many Chesapeake slaves. A gruesome stew of greed, racism, and brutality helped create a substantial interstate slave trade by 1812.

That Virginia politicians saw the economic opportunities inherent in closing the Atlantic Trade is beyond dispute. But Deyle slights other factors, notably a genuine humanitarian desire to end a notoriously diabolical practice. In a similar fashion, the ardor of some Virginians to acquire Louisiana involved more than finding a new market for their slaves. The region had obvious strategic value and its acquisition would provide more land that could be carved into plantations. Virginians wanted not only somewhere to sell their slaves, but a place to migrate with them.

Slave commerce burrowed deeper into southern society by increasing the value of slaves. Deyle asserts, probably without enough evidence, that the slave trade increased the price of bondpeople. It seems like a self-evident argument, but the reverse might be true. In either case, slave prices rose dramatically in the 1850s and fueled the perception that fewer white southerners could afford even one slave. The natural consequence was a disjointed effort to reopen the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in order to blunt the effects of inflation and provide enough slaves to sustain westward expansion. Diehards, of course, failed in their quest for more African slaves and the interstate slave trade surged forward. Deyle makes the interesting conclusion that the domestic slave

trade both strengthened and weakened slavery. States of the Deep South became more passionately committed to the peculiar institution while the Upper South states had fewer bondservants and less of a stake in preserving slavery. “[C]otton, rice and sugar are greater abolitionists by far than Garrison, Greeley, Giddings, or Gerritt Smith,” wrote the *New York Express* (p. 91).

When the tug came in 1860-61, the interstate slave trade helped ensure southern secession. Since slave sales helped drive up slave prices, according to Deyle, secession was the logical reaction. The point is well taken even if Deyle slightly exaggerates his case. He argues that one of the reasons the Upper South eventually seceded was to preserve its market in slaves. That Virginia’s “entire economy was based on the institution of chattel slavery” is a debatable point, and the state had other reasons for secession (p. 93). Deyle’s point is clear, though: the interstate slave trade sustained slavery and added value to bondspeople.

Slavery and the slave trade set the South apart from the rest of the nation and imprinted a certain attitude on the region. When Deyle describes the business culture associated with the sale of slaves, however, the South looks and acts much like the rest of the country. Interstate slave traders resembled northern peddlers to some degree. Most traders were small scale and worked a limited territory, but a number established large fortunes. Deyle effectively shows how the interstate slave trade was part of the market revolution, full of self-made men on the make. A surprising omission is the lack of connection between the southern slave trade and northern systems of finance. One of Deyle’s stated goals for the book was to show the influence of the interstate slave trade on the entire country, and one would presume that finances would be an excellent place to start.

Deyle is one of the few historians of the commerce in slaves to provide an extended discussion of the local slave trade.[2] He concludes that local sales reaffirmed a community’s public commitment to slavery. Auctions were social occasions that almost became ritualistic in their ability to maintain order within the slave society. Buyers used their cash (or, more likely, credit) to sanction the future of slavery. Interstate slave traders might find themselves at odds here since the presence of outsiders created tension within the community. Locals often elbowed slave traders out of the competition for likely slaves. Although such stories often became pro-slavery apologia, they indicate that other motivations were at work in the South. The blatant and public exploitation

of slaves *could* become offensive even if slavery was accepted as a matter of course. The ritualistic cleansing of the temple by throwing out the greedy speculators affirmed the commitment to slavery even as it massaged misgivings over slave sales.

The slave trade could create a tug of war between paternalism and the commerce in slaves. It is obvious that the violent and disruptive nature of the slave trade directly contradicted any pretensions that masters might have to a kind and gentle treatment of “their people.” But paternalist feelings could prevent the interstate slave trade from full acceptance in southern society. Deyle makes the useful observation that readers of southern newspapers could scan tables with the current market prices for cotton, rice, hogs, and the like but could not find corresponding data for the prices of slaves. Owners, nonetheless, found ways to explain away their sale of slaves, usually citing punishment as the primary reason. Slaves *deserved* sale according to this line of thinking because of their negative behavior.

If the interstate slave trade created unease for some white southerners, it certainly drew attacks from those outside the region. Abolitionists hammered away at the interstate slave trade. It is no coincidence that William Lloyd Garrison put a picture of a slave sale on the masthead of the *Liberator*. The interstate slave trade became the quintessential evil because it reduced men to things and increased the suffering of slaves. Deyle’s discussion here is quite perceptive, especially when he traces how abolitionists toned down these aggressive attacks around 1850 in an effort to broaden support.[3]

Most of the book is about the influence of the interstate slave trade on America, but the final chapter is devoted to the trade’s effects on African Americans. The discussion here is solid and follows previous interpretations that have shown how slaves resisted sale or influenced their purchase. Deyle adds to the discussion by including a surprising number of letters from slaves who had been separated by sale. One slave wrote to his wife, “if we Shall not meet in this world I hope to meet in heaven. My Dear wife for you and my Children my pen cannot Express the griffe I feel to be parted from you all. I remain your truly husband until Death” (pp. 271-272). The voices of the enslaved impart meaning and depth to the book.

Carry Me Back is the product of prodigious research. Deyle has ransacked archives, special collections, and libraries for a prodigious array of primary material devoted to the interstate slave trade. Even more impressive

is his command of southern newspapers. The amount of time he spent looking at microfilm must have been staggering. Deyle is also conversant with all the relevant secondary literature and the result is an admirable book that advances our understanding of the interstate slave trade and its meaning for America.

Notes

[1]. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (1931; reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): pp. 1619-1650; Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana

State University Press, 2003); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[2]. The best account of the local trade is Thomas D. Russell, "Sale Day in Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy and Court-Supervised Sales," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1993).

[3]. The abolitionist attack on the interstate slave trade is amply discussed in David L. Lightner, "The Door to the Slave Bastille: The Abolitionist Assault upon the Interstate Slave Trade, 1833-1839," *Civil War History* 34 (1988): pp. 235-252; and David L. Lightner, "The Interstate Slave Trade in Antislavery Politics," *Civil War History* 36 (1990): pp. 119-136.

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Citation: Robert H. Gudmestad. Review of Deyle, Steven, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

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