

# ON THE STRUCTURAL BASIS OF SOCIAL MEMORY

## CITYSCAPES OF THE NEW ORLEANS SLAVE TRADE, PART II

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*This article is a continuation from last month's Preservation in Print, in which the author noted the absence of structural relics of the slave trade in modern New Orleans, despite its ubiquity in the cityscape of antebellum times.*

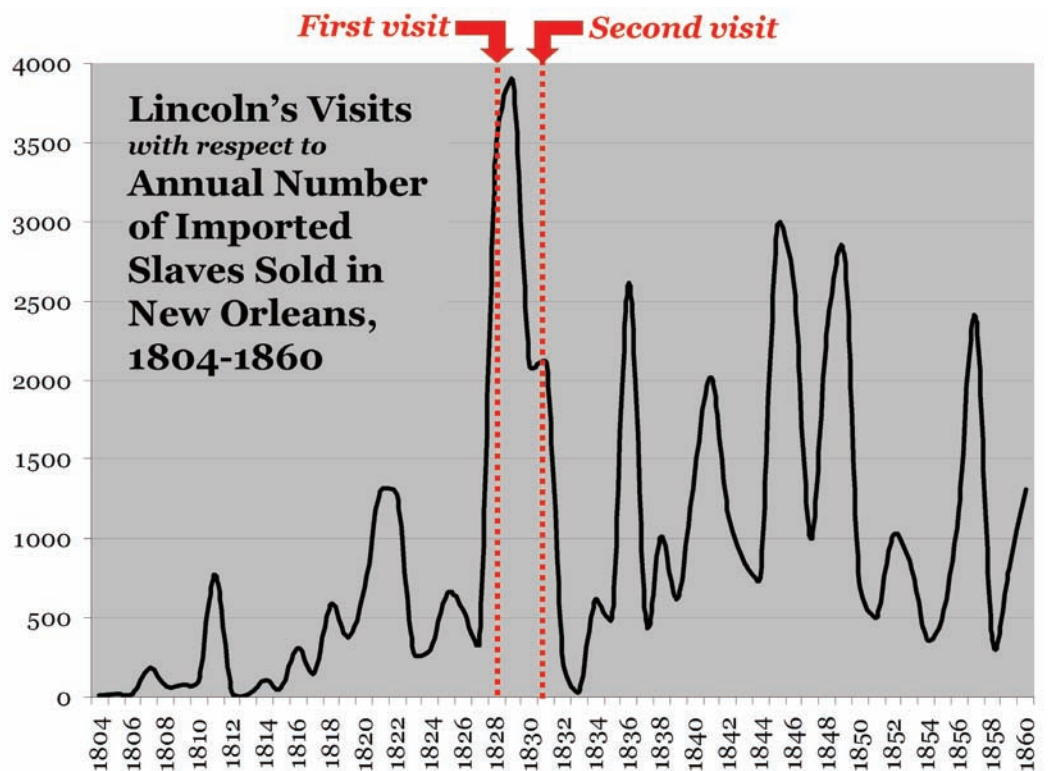
**C**OMPARATIVE MEASUREMENTS of the nation's various urban slave marketplaces are difficult to ascertain because each Southern city documented the trafficking in differing ways. Yet nearly all qualified observers, in both historical times and today, agree that New Orleans' slave-trading enterprise trumped that of all other American cities for most of the antebellum era, usually by a wide margin. The reason stemmed from same economic-geographical factors driving New Orleans' overall commercial rigor: the metropolis was perfectly positioned as a transshipment point along the watery intercourse between the slave-supply regions of the Upper South and the labor-demanding plantations of the lower Mississippi Valley. As the largest city in the South, serving the nation's highest regional concentration of millionaire planters, New Orleans also demanded thousands of slaves for its own needs, and eagerly developed the physical, financial and administrative infrastructure to handle the commerce.

The size of that commerce may be estimated through various sources. Evidence from the 1840s indicates that 200 to 300 local professionals dealt directly in the city's slave trade, handling at least a few thousand sales per year. Journal accounts provide estimates of the ever-rotating population of the city's slave-holding pens. Wrote one visitor, "There were about 1000 slaves for sale at New Orleans while I was there" in March 1830. "I cannot say as to the number of negroes in the [New Orleans] market," wrote a trader in 1834, "though am of the opinion there is 12-1500 and upwards, and small lots constantly coming in." Other eyewitnesses estimated 3,000 slaves for sale at a particular moment later in the antebellum era, equating to

roughly one marketed slave for every five resident slaves in the city.

Official documents provide further insights into the size of New Orleans' slave trade. According to historian Donald Edward Everett, conveyance records of real property transactions (Louisiana's civil law tradition viewed slaves as real estate, thus requiring title) show that 4,435 slave purchases occurred in the city just in the year 1830. That same cohort was also tracked through the Notarial Ar-

chives' collection of Certificates of Good Character, the document required by law from 1829 to 1831 to prevent "undesirable" Upper South slaves from entering Louisiana. Economic historians Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan B. Pritchett tabulated 2,289 such slaves arriving into the New Orleans market in 1830. Their findings show that this group came mostly from the Old South states along the Eastern Seaboard. They were disproportionately male by roughly a 60-40 ratio, possibly reflecting



Graph based on Notarial Archives records researched by Fogel and Engerman (1974) and tabulated by Jonathon B. Pritchett (1991). Figures reflect only those slaves imported from out-of-state and sold in New Orleans, with records in the Notarial Archives.

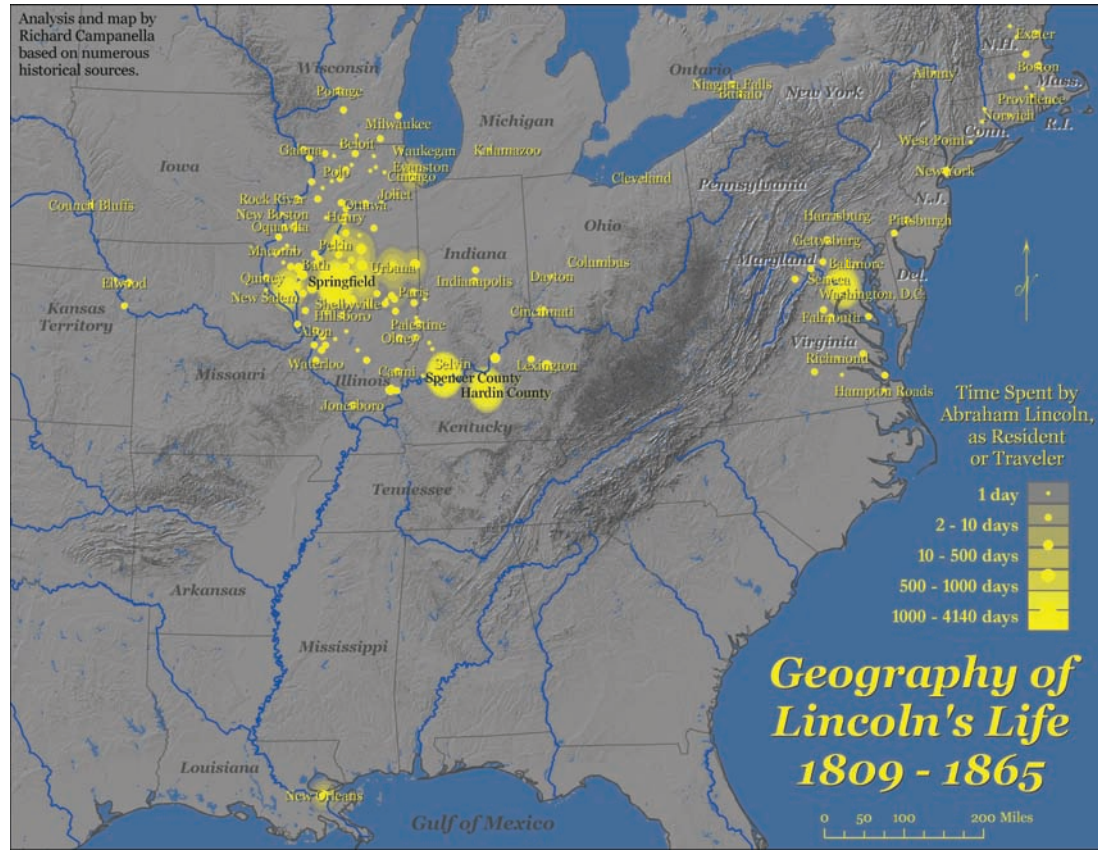
In terms of season and era, Lincoln visited New Orleans when it engaged in the importation and trading of slaves with great vigor. Data based on Notarial Archives records researched by Fogel and Engerman (1974) and tabulated by Jonathon B. Pritchett (1991); graph by Richard Campanella, from "Lincoln in New Orleans" (University of Louisiana Press, 2010).



the demands of sugar cane cultivation. Over 93 percent ranged from 11 to 30 years old, with healthy young adult males typically selling for around five hundred dollars. Those who embarked at the major export cities of Richmond, Norfolk, and Charleston endured coastwise journeys lasting about three weeks. Those who were marched overland in coffles suffered tortuous experiences that could easily take two months. Whether delivered by sea, river, or land, Virginia supplied the largest share (44 percent) of slaves to the Deep South, followed by North Carolina (19 percent) and Maryland (15 percent), with other Southern states ranging between .02 and 5 percent. The buyers, on the other hand, were mostly from Louisiana (71 percent). Scores of Virginians, Tennesseans, Georgians, and others also bought members of this cohort of 2,289, but it is likely these out-of-state planters had Louisiana ties.

Slave sales were not evenly distributed throughout the year. They rose steadily in late autumn and peaked in the winter and early spring with the approaching planting season, then declined as temperatures rose and bottomed-out with the high heat of the epidemic months of late summer and early fall. First-person accounts as well as numerical data point to January, February and March as being particularly busy times in the New Orleans slave trade — the same period when shipping activity, flatboat arrivals and most other economic and social activity peaked. Slaves were thus imported and traded here in greater frequency and in wider view precisely as visitors circulated throughout the city in greater numbers. Because slaves typically endured an average of 40 days in limbo — that is, after arriving but before being sold — they accumulated in various holding pens and camps in downtown New Orleans, creating yet another jaw-dropping spectacle for the uninitiated. New Orleans not only boasted the nation's busiest slave market, but its trafficking of human beings, wrote historian Frederic Bancroft, “had a peculiar dash: it rejoiced in its display and prosperity; it felt unashamed, almost proud.” A typical newcomer like young Abraham Lincoln, strolling the levee or peeking into a coffee house, would have thus encountered the crass realities of human chattel business constantly, unavoidably.

Citizens sometimes launched efforts to curtail the flagrancy of the commerce, perhaps because its unsettling appearance played into the hands of visiting abolitionists, but more likely because concentrations of slaves in transit were thought to constitute a public health nuisance. During the time of Lincoln's 1828 visit, a session in City Hall recorded that “several inhabitants of this City” signed a petition “to ask the Council...to prevent exposing negroes for sale on the sidewalks.” Leery officials wavered on the request, procrastinated, read a report on the matter, and finally rejected it, for fear of tampering with the lucrative industry. The issue came up a few months later, when citizens asked “if it would not be proper to fix places for storing negroes for sale outside the body of the city,” fearing risk of an epidemic. Others complained of the odors emanating from the unsanitary conditions in the pens, or from the cooking of cheap barrel pork used to feed the captives. Finally, in the year between Lincoln's visits, the City Council passed laws prohibiting public exposition of slaves for



Mapping Lincoln's life illustrates the exceptional nature of his two flatboat journeys to New Orleans. They formed the longest journeys of his life, his first experiences in a major city, his only visits to the Deep South, and his sole exposure to the region's brand of slavery and slave trading. Analysis and map by Richard Campanella, from *Lincoln in New Orleans* (University of Louisiana Press, 2010).

sale, as well as their nighttime lodging, in the area bounded by Girod Street, Esplanade Avenue, Levee Street along the riverfront, and Tremé Street behind the city. Even then, the law did little to conceal the spectacle. Protests from slave traders below Esplanade Avenue led the Council to clarify, in 1830, that “all negroe traders may keep and expose for sale their negroes within the whole extent of the limits of the suburb Marigny, all resolutions to the contrary notwithstanding.” At least one trader above Esplanade Avenue, where public exposition was supposedly banned, nevertheless openly inaugurated a private slave-trading operation during the time of Lincoln's second visit in 1831. His ad in the *New Orleans Bee* read,

R. Salaun, Broker and Exchange Broker, Royale, between Hospital and Barracks streets, has the honor of informing his friends and the public, that he attends to the sales and purchases of slaves and real estate. Persons, who may feel inclined to leave their slaves with him, for sale, can be assured that no exertion will be neglected to have them disposed of on the best terms and shortest delay. He offers for sale, at present, laundresses and plaiters [braiders], seamstresses, cooks, carpenters, painters and blacksmiths.

In 1835, the law against public exposure of “negroes for sale” was expanded to the entire city, but once again was promptly amended to permit such activity in the faubourgs above Gaienné Street and anywhere in the Faubourg Marigny, provided the slaves were lodged in brick buildings at least two stories high.

These and later laws show that city officials actively grappled with slave dealing, but mostly out of concern for their own health, comfort, profit and public image. Other Southern cities did the same for similar reasons: Natchez, for example,

passed laws in 1833 relocating its downtown slave pens to the infamous “Forks in the Road” beyond city limits. Rarely did authorities fret over the slaves' trauma or degradation, and never did they question the underlying institution. Lincoln arrived while this debate played out, and if the laws were enforced as they were written, he may have witnessed slave trading in the cityscape to a greater extent during his 1828 visit than in 1831. Had he returned 25 years later, he would have seen an even broader and deeper manifestation of the controversial commerce: in the late 1850s, around 25 slave depots, yards, pens or booths dotted the heart of Faubourg St. Mary (present-day Central Business District), with a dozen on Gravier Street, a half dozen on Baronne, and others on Common and Magazine. Another dozen functioned in the Old City, on Exchange Place, St. Louis Street, Esplanade at Chartres, and elsewhere.

A visitor to New Orleans arriving any time prior to the Civil War could not help but witness an entire cityscape of slave trading. Visitors today, however, would be hard-pressed to find any substantial, identified physical evidence remaining; it's all be cleared away by demolition, conflagration, or the ravages of time. Lacking a preserved, visible structural framework reminding us of this historical reality, our social memory is prone to falter.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of Lincoln in New Orleans, Bienville's Dilemma, Geographies of New Orleans, and other books. This piece is modified from content in Lincoln in New Orleans, which includes footnotes and sources. Campanella may be reached through richcampanella.com or rcampane@tulane.edu; and followed on Twitter at nolacampanella.*