

In Plain View

INDUSTRIAL SLAVERY and the St. Matthews Railroad Cut



An early 1900s postcard of St. Matthews. (Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.)

EXPENSE	COST
1 Overseer at \$50/month	\$50.00
18 Laborers at \$14/month	\$252.00
Tools for embanking force	\$10.00
Provisions for 18 negroes at \$3.00 each	\$54.00

Current Expenses in Road Department up to December 31, 1841, which may refer to workers in Lewisville. (Semi-Annual Report to the Stockholders of the South Carolina Canal and Rail-Road Company made on the third Monday in January [the 17th]), Printed by A.E. Miller, Charleston, 25 Broad St., 1842.

Legacy of Industrial Slavery

While slave-built railroad lines still exist today, there are very few industrial buildings from the antebellum years. The ruins of South Carolina's Saluda Mill are the only obvious pieces of a structure built in 1834 to produce brown cloth for slave clothing. A few furnace stacks in the state, dating from the early 1800s, are the remains of the early ironwork industry, which typically had 100 enslaved workers for growing crops, cutting timber, mining ore and limestone, operating the furnace, and making charcoal at each factory. Other sites may still exist, but for modern St. Matthews, evidence of industrial slavery makes up the most important physical feature of the town.

The South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company is known today as Norfolk Southern. The St. Matthews Railroad cut still appears much as it did after construction. It reveals the contribution of African Americans building the South.

FUNDING BY SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
Poster Concept and Design: New South Associates

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Industrial Slavery in the Old South, Robert S. Starobin, 1970
Slavery in the Cities: the South, 1820-1860, Richard C. Wade, 1967

Working Conditions

William Pinckney McBee, a white worker for the S.C. Railroad Company in April of 1851, wrote a letter to his wife requesting a coat "made light – I cannot carry weight in the field on hot days – Also a pair of pants made of some light tweeds," and a "light cheap oil cloth cap" as "We have rain nearly every day [and] mud – you never saw the like." Conditions for African Americans were likely worse, as they could not request specialty clothing.

The Railroad Comes Through Town

The S.C. Canal and Railroad Company built its first branch line through Lewisville (later named St. Matthews) in 1840-41. Plantations and farmhouses, large summer homes, and slave cabins dotted the landscape around the town, and the railroad offered a quick way to send its farm goods to markets in Columbia and Charleston.

Two prominent land and slaveholders in Lewisville, Jacob M. Dantzler and John J. Wannamaker, made some of their land and enslaved workers available to the railroad. By 1841, the S.C. Canal and Railroad Company desired to drop the pay for their workers to only \$13 per month, even though "the fellows re-hired are accustomed to the use of the axe, adze and saw, and lifting heavy timber, the work required of them." For the new branch line through Lewisville, however, the company probably used local enslaved workers for unskilled labor such as digging the roadbed.

One 1840 report boasted that "The embankments . . . will compare. . .with any similar work in the United States." The enslaved workers owned by the company were praised "as efficient, as faithful, and as manageable as those hired."

STATEMENT OF SLAVES BELONGING TO THE SOUTH CAROLINA RAIL ROAD COMPANY, DECEMBER 31, 1859

No.	Dates of Purchase	From whom Purchased	Names of Slaves	Cost
1	Apr., 1836	James Vidal	Anthony	
2	Feb., 1845	Estate McMillan	Jack	825.00
3	" "	"	Frank	400.00
4	" "	"	Andrew	400.00
5	Aug., 1848	S. J. Young	Essex	686.00
6	Nov., 1850	N. C. Trowbridge	Richard	750.00
7	" "	"	John	900.00
8	" "	"	Nelson	900.00
9	" "	"	Richardson	900.00
10	" "	"	Jeff	900.00
11	" "	"	Nelson	900.00
12	" "	"	Harrison	900.00
13	" "	"	Cyrus	900.00
14	" "	"	Jim (black)	900.00
15	Jan., 1851	Esther S. McNeil	William	900.00
16	Mar., 1852	James and Rob't Adger	Pompey	800.00
17	Apr., "	W. A. Harriss	Jerry	451.00
18	" "	J. C. Sproull & Co.	William Stovall	820.00
19	" "	"	Hardtimes Gadsden	748.25
20	" "	"	George Bailey	907.12
21	" "	"		896.87
22	" "	"		
23	" "	"		

Factory employed 93 hands, though only one-third of the workers were African American. A Bennetville factory worked 35 hands from the age of 10 and up, with only 5 enslaved workers.

These industries often used the enslaved labor of women and children. Enslaved children reportedly cost two-thirds as much as adults to feed and clothe, and women were much less expensive than men. However, one Carolinian noted, "In ditching, particularly in canals . . . a woman can do nearly as much work as a man." The less strenuous work of textile mills was often preferred for those enslaved children, women, and senior adults who were not strong enough to work in the fields or in heavy industry.

Working on the Railroad

Another large employer of enslaved workers in South Carolina was the railroad industry. Labor intensive during construction, and in constant need of maintenance and repairs, railroads were steady employers of African Americans, mostly adult men.

The South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company, formed in 1827, completed its first track in 1833. At 136 miles it was the longest track in the world, and ran from Charleston to Hamburg, S.C., located north of Augusta, Georgia. It continued to build branch lines in the state, and soon realized that white workers, "Unwilling to risk their lives in the swampy situations," abandoned the work as summer began. To make up for the lost men, the company hired enslaved people from plantations near the new roadbed, and purchased 89 African Americans between 1845 and 1860.



SC Railroad Railroad route through Lewisville, later St. Matthews, connecting Columbia to Charleston. (Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-65, General Topographical Map Sheet VIII. Julius Bien and Company, Lithographs, New York. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.)

(Right) A list of enslaved people purchased by the South Carolina Railroad Company. The high prices, often around \$1,000, suggests that these were healthy adults, and the names seem to indicate they were men. While the company suggested in an 1847 report that women be employed with the men, "in order to prevent the demoralizing effects of separating them," it does not appear that the company purchased women. (Samuel Melancthon Derrick, *Centennial History of South Carolina Railroad*. The State Company, Columbia, South Carolina, 1930.)



St. Matthews Railroad Cut

In 1841, a new branch of the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company was completed through Lewisville (renamed St. Matthews in 1876), connecting Columbia with Charleston. Enslaved workers dug a steep cut through Lewisville, using handmade wood baskets to slowly haul away tons of dirt. According to local history, the railroad company hired some of the enslaved workers from nearby plantations for the hard work of clearing land, digging roadbeds, and laying the track. The St. Matthews Railroad Cut, which is a defining feature of St. Matthews today, is one of the rare examples of a preserved landscape shaped by enslaved black labor.

Industrial Slavery in the South

While 84 % of American industry was centered in the North prior to the Civil War, industry was also a small but an important part of the southern economy. Many different industries used slave labor and by the 1850s around 5% of enslaved individuals worked in industrial settings. The remainder worked the fields. While only 200,000 individuals worked in industry, these men, women, and children made a distinct contribution through their labor and bear stories that provide a different perspective on slavery in the South.

"We are accustomed to black labor, and it would create a revolution to drive it away."

(From a report created by the Committee on Negro Population of the South Carolina Legislature, printed in *Debow's Review*, Vol. 26, issue 5, 1859.)



"Twist Room." (Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection. "In a Tobacco Factory," M.P. Handy, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 47, issue 281, 1873:713-719.)

As one of the most important and largest industrial cities in the southern states, Richmond, Virginia had many factories that relied on slave labor. It was first in the nation for tobacco manufacturing, and by 1860, some of its factories employed over 100 workers each. Forty-

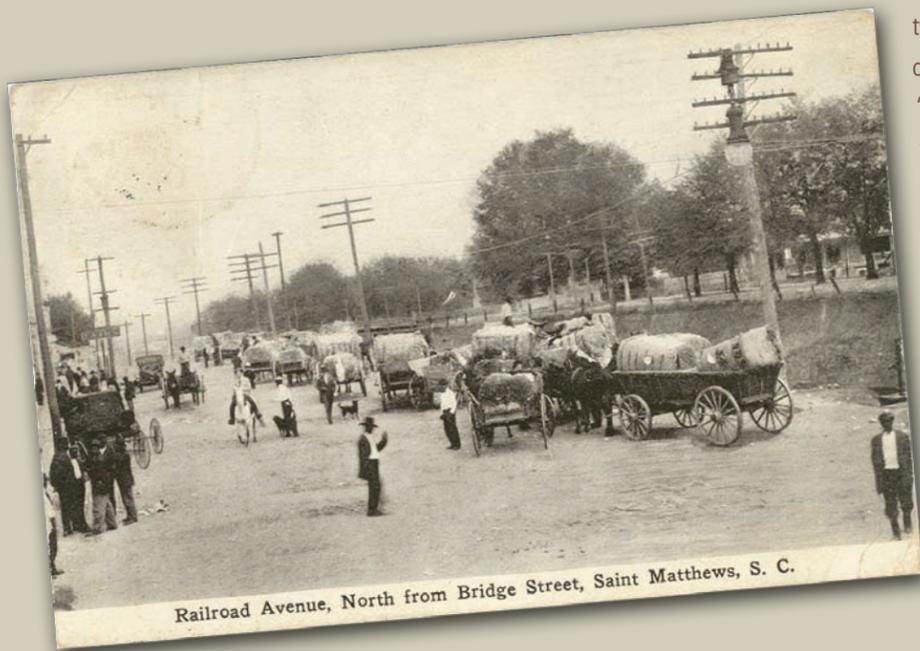
Southern Industries which used Slave Labor

Cotton gins	Blacksmithing
Rice mills	Carpentry
Indigo production	Cabinet makers
Sugar mills	Mining
Salt works	Iron manufacturing
Tobacco manufacture	Lumber industry
Turpentine industry	Road, bridge, canal building
S.C. Edgefield pottery	Brick works
Shoe factories	Bagging factories
Rope manufacturers	Railroad companies
Waterfront Labor	Tanneries

two of the 55 factories had ten or more African Americans, of various ages, and one tobacco manufacturer asked for "fifty boys from 12 to 10 years of age." Older and younger workers did simple jobs, such as separating and flavoring the leaves.

In the warm months of 1825, a visitor to a southern tobacco factory saw enslaved men groaning with effort from their work. Their hard labor would continue for most of the day, as industrial work lasted from 10 to 16 hours per day, depending on the season and the employer. Another antebellum visitor heard workers

"Railroad Avenue, north from Bridge Street, St. Matthews." Ca. 1914. (Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia).



singing sometimes "all day long with great spirit." Singing helped regulate the work pace in industry the same way it did in the fields, and some managers encouraged it.

Hiring Out

Industries often used a "hiring out" contract with the slave owner. Some enslaved people could hire themselves out, while giving all or a majority of their wages to their owner. One gold miner in North Carolina argued with a slave owner about his bill, as three of the women were pregnant before he hired them and they could not work. According to the Committee on Negro Population of the South Carolina Legislature, hiring out allowed slaves to "exercise all the privileges of the free persons, make contracts, do work, and in every way live and conduct themselves as if they were not slaves... The evil is, he buys the control of his own time from his owner... The evil lies in the breaking down the relation between master and slave."

Provisions for Workers

While some factory owners hired temporary workers from nearby slave owners, around four-fifths of them bought laborers, and provided food, clothing, and shelter. Several used the same customs as plantations, and had weekly religious services, allowed a Christmas holiday, and provided medical care. One incentive not found on plantations, but offered at some industries, was the chance to earn money through overtime or extra work.

I was born in Charleston, S.C., in June, 1839. As I was once a slave, but, by the blessing of the Almighty, have become free, I wish to preserve a little history of my life and deliverance.

My mother was of mixed blood. My father was Robert Summerson, a white man, from the North. He left two children when he went North, my brother and myself. When I was seven years old, my brother and my mother were sold down South. My owner allowed my aunt to take me to raise, and she kept me till I became old enough to work. They then took me from her, and "hired me out." After I became large enough to take care of myself, I hired my own time, paying them so much a month. I went on a steamer between Charleston and the head of the St. John's River, Florida. I got along as well as I could in a state of slavery until the death of my owner. The children took charge of me, and I did not fare so well.

Excerpt: Autobiography of William Summerson, steamboatman and clerk, 1862 (John W. Blassingame, editor, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge:Louisiana State University 1972:699)

South Carolina's Antebellum Industries

South Carolina industries employed both enslaved workers and whites in manufacturing. Poor and working-class whites argued that it was unfair competition for jobs. William Gregg employed only poor white workers at his Graniteville textile mill. However, in Charleston, two mills each owned more than 70 enslaved African Americans in 1840. In Camden, the DeKalb

This contract from February of 1846 lists eight enslaved people that will work for the South Carolina Railroad for eleven months, at only eight dollars per person. What are their names? (Memorandum of Agreement, Papers of the Cantey Family, 1771-1913, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.)

