

**The Legacy of Stones River:
Slavery and the Civil War in Tennessee**

**A Symposium in Murfreesboro, TN
March 6, 2004**

Summaries of Speakers' Presentations

**Gary T. Edwards, University of Memphis
"Slavery as an Institution in Tennessee"**

Mr. Edwards set the stage for the symposium by providing a detailed overview of slavery in Tennessee before the Civil War. With abundant statistical evidence, he clearly demonstrated the significant role that slavery played across the state as an economic, political, and cultural institution.

Mr. Edwards first emphasized the prominence of slavery within the state's antebellum economy. Of the 15 slave states in 1860, Tennessee ranked 8th in the number of slaves. About 25% of Tennessee families owned slaves. There were, of course, regional differences within the state; areas with significant cotton and tobacco production were home to the most slaves. West Tennessee included the top two slaveholding counties, and East Tennessee had just a small number of slaves.

Mr. Edwards next discussed slavery as a legal and political institution. From Tennessee's early years, lawmakers inserted slavery and race into the state's legal code. The state enacted laws regarding citizenship, marriage, slave patrols, and emancipation, among other aspects of everyday life. Not surprisingly, Tennessee's political leaders often held large numbers of slaves.

As a cultural institution, slavery had a powerful influence on Tennessee's residents. Mr. Edwards focused in particular on the effect slavery had on white families of different classes. For children in upper-class families, for example, the work of slaves freed them to go to school, while children in middle-class families often labored in the fields with the slaves.

Mr. Edwards concluded that the institution of slavery affected every facet of life in Tennessee before the Civil War.

Linda T. Wynn, Tennessee Historical Commission/Fisk University
“Slave Life in Tennessee”

Ms. Wynn reviewed the history of slavery in the United States, describing the process by which the institution became predominant in American life. She also gave a brief overview of the scholarship on slavery, focusing on the significance of the evidence that scholars have found in the autobiographies of former slaves.

Like Mr. Edwards, Ms. Wynn emphasized how slavery became the bedrock of the economy and social order in the South. She traced slavery in Tennessee to its North Carolina origins and discussed some of the characteristics of antebellum slavery. Most slaves in Tennessee before the Civil War, for example, lived on small farms.

Wherever they resided, slaves developed their own culture as a form of resistance, according to Ms. Wynn. Through music and folk tales, for example, slaves developed ways to persevere, retain their humanity, and resist white acculturation. Although nuclear families remained the essential elements of slave family life, slaves also developed surrogate families as a means of support. It is important to remember that slaves did not share a uniform experience throughout the state of Tennessee, or the South. Ms. Wynn listed several questions that should be asked when trying to determine the experience of slaves: What type of farm did the slaves live on? How many slaves lived there? What type of master was the owner? What type of household did the owner have?

Ms. Wynn next discussed slave life in three Tennessee communities: the Hermitage, the Clover Bottoms, and Madison County. Case studies of slavery in all three communities include evidence, such as slaves' ownership of firearms, that challenges some of our preconceived notions of slavery.

Ms. Wynn concluded by calling for more research and writing from slaves' perspectives, in order to counter the symbolic annihilation of slaves' life and work that comes with the glorification of the elite in many standard interpretations of southern history.

Robert Gudmestad, Southwest Baptist University
“The Troubled Legacy of Isaac Franklin”

Dr. Gudmestad emphasized the significance of the interstate slave trade as a central element in the antebellum debate over whether slavery was a beneficial or brutal institution. Many white residents of the Old South embraced slavery as an uplifting institution and associated the negative aspects of slavery with slave trading. In this view, the slave traders—who broke up families and treated slaves roughly—rather than the everyday slave owners made up the evil part of the system.

To illustrate his discussion of the interstate slave trade, Dr. Gudmestad focused on the life and legacy of Isaac Franklin, a slave trader who owned a plantation called Fairvue in Sumner County, Tennessee. With his nephew John Armfield, Franklin ran the largest slave-trading firm in the United States before the Civil War. The Franklin and Armfield firm transformed the

slave-trading business by implementing various marketing strategies and making several innovations, the most significant of which was the coastwise transportation of slaves from the upper to the lower South via a fleet of ships owned and operated by the company.

Franklin and Armfield sold their firm when it was at the peak of its success. Before the sale, Dr. Gudmestad showed, each of the men had looked ahead to his transition from trader to planter. Franklin owned additional plantations in Louisiana and Texas. In 1839, he married Tennessean Adelia Hayes, daughter of a prominent attorney and minister. Franklin also sought to establish himself as a philanthropist, placing in his will his desire to establish a county school at Fairvue.

At the end of his talk, Dr. Gudmestad described the later uses of some of the land and property that once belonged to Franklin and Armfield. Part of the firm's former slave pen in Alexandria became a hospital for African American soldiers during the Civil War. Franklin's Angola plantation in Louisiana became a state prison. Fairvue is currently being turned into a residential development and golf course community; earlier plans that would have transformed the former slave quarters into bed-and-breakfast units fell through.

Dr. Gudmestad's full treatment of the interstate slave trade is in his *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (2004), and his detailed discussion of Isaac Franklin is in the Fall 2003 issue of the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*.

Charles Dew, Williams College

"Secession Commissioners in Nashville: Slavery and Disunion in Tennessee"

Dr. Dew addressed the issue of the causes of the Civil War. During the war and since, the debate has been between slavery or states' rights as the primary cause of the war. Dr. Dew shared his finding that a resolution of this debate lies in the words of the secession commissioners, which clearly point to slavery as the core issue.

Early in 1861, the five states that had seceded from the Union—South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana—sent out commissioners to the other southern states, including Tennessee. Their mission was to explain why their states had seceded and to persuade the other states to join them.

Dr. Dew quoted from several speeches given by the secession commissioners, including those who visited Tennessee. From these speeches and writings by the commissioners, three major explanations were given for why it was necessary for southern states to secede in the wake of President Abraham Lincoln's election: the promotion of equality of the races and accompanying destruction of white supremacy, the real possibility of a race war, and the prospect of miscegenation. Dr. Dew made clear that the secession commissioners used very tough language to describe the supposed perils ahead for states, like Tennessee, that remained in the Union.

Dr. Dew also reviewed the situation of Tennessee in particular, discussing why there had been no rush to secede in the state. Factors contributing to this included the state's regional diversity, characterized by the three grand divisions; the continued power of two-party politics within the state; and the hope that the states of the upper South could bring North and South back together.

The firing on Fort Sumter and President Lincoln's call for troops ultimately convinced Tennessee to secede.

Dr. Dew concluded by making the point that there is a difference between why wars come about and why individuals enlist to fight. Although slavery was at the root of Civil War causation, defense of hearth and home was undoubtedly at the core of Confederate enlistment.

Dr. Dew's conclusions regarding the secession commissioners and the causes of the war are outlined in full in his *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (2002).

Question-and-Answer Session

There was a lively discussion during the symposium. Topics covered include slave breeding, sources for statistical information about slavery in Tennessee, childbearing by slave women, General Patrick Cleburne's proposal regarding the emancipation and enlistment of slaves, African Americans' service on behalf of the Confederacy, the meaning of "states' rights," and the reasons that Northerners joined the Union war effort.

The question that perhaps generated the most discussion was "Why is it still so hard to talk about the issue of slavery today?" The willingness of the symposium's speakers and attendees to discuss the complex, complicated issue of slavery, and its relationship to the Civil War, points to the progress that has been made in bringing slavery to the forefront in Civil War studies. The spirited discussion that took place also suggests that there is a significant need for, and interest in, additional educational forums on this topic in the future.