



AN ESSAY

Slavery and the history of business

An interview with historian and author Caitlin Rosenthal on how accounting practices on plantations continues to influence today's economy. Find out how she used ProQuest History Vault in researching her book, ***Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management***.



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In a recent interview with historian and author Caitlin Rosenthal, she described her research on quantitative management practices on West Indian and Southern plantations, her book *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*, and using ProQuest History Vault in research and teaching.

Tell us about your book, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*

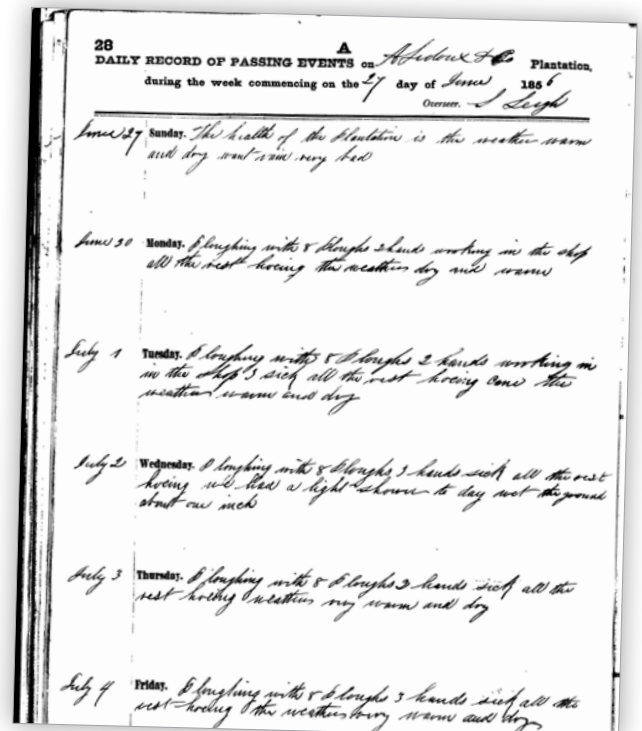
My work on the business history of slavery began the first time I looked at a plantation account book. I was surprised by the complexity of the accounting and the diligence with which the overseer tracked output. This went against most of what I had learned from canonical business histories: Economic historian Alfred Chandler described plantations as an “ancient” mode of production.

But looking at the records, the violence of slavery seemed not to be a barrier to the emergence of innovative managerial practices — to the contrary, planters’ control over enslaved people sometimes made data particularly useful. Where contemporary factories had to recruit and retain workers, slaveholders simply reallocated enslaved people to new tasks. Their domination over enslaved people enabled them to use small incentives as well as the threat of punishment to monitor and accelerate the pace of work.

As I continued to research plantation management practices, I found numerous instances when plantations used data in sophisticated ways. *Accounting for Slavery’s* chapters are arranged around some of these milestones. I began the British West Indies, where late 18th century sugar planters built complex organizations akin to the hierarchies that would later emerge in factories. On these plantations, enslaved people occupied many different positions, both skilled and unskilled, even serving as managers. Planters used both data and violence to monitor and manage these massive operations, which sometimes included dozens of properties worked by thousands of enslaved people. They required their free staff to keep detailed accounts and even to fill out pre-printed forms that synthesized this data.

“I found numerous instances when plantations used data in sophisticated ways.”

From here, *Accounting for Slavery* turns to the antebellum American South where I describe the records of cotton planters who assiduously tracked enslaved people, both as labor and as capital. Although these plantations were smaller in scale, some of the records they kept were even more complex than those maintained in the West Indies. For example, overseers recorded the amount of cotton picked by each person each day, and inventories measured the appreciation of children as they grew up and the depreciation of the ill and the elderly. Planters summed up these appraisals to track the evolving value of entire communities.





Briefly explain why studying the business practices of 18th and 19th century southern plantations is relevant for 21st century students.

Fundamentally, the book is a study of the intersection of violence and innovation. Too often modern businesses assume that sophisticated technologies go hand in hand with the expansion of human freedoms — that capitalism can only thrive on the backs of free laborers. These records show that the opposite can be true. Planters treated enslaved people as if they were cogs in a giant machine, exploiting their production and reproduction to earn massive fortunes. Recovering this history is a cautionary tale about what capitalism can look like when everything, including lives, is up for sale.

We're living in a world where data is more important to businesses than ever, and quantitative management poses distinctive ethical challenges. Reducing people to numbers can offer crucial insights, but it also erases context and can make it harder to see biases. My research offers an opportunity to study a setting where business people used quantitative records to strengthen a horrifying and exploitative system. Moreover, some slave-owners did this from a distance—they consulted accounting records to make decisions about profitability without ever having to really encounter the brutality of slavery.

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Describe how you used ProQuest History Vault in your research.

Huge numbers of account books survive from slave plantations, and the challenge I faced while writing this book was sorting from this massive pile. When I started the project, the best way to get a sense of the range of southern account books was to use the *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations* (usually called RASP), a huge microfilm collection edited by Kenneth Stampf and others. Now large parts of that collection are online at ProQuest History Vault and searching them helped me to turn up materials I would never have found otherwise.

One set of records that I would not have consulted without access to ProQuest History Vault is the DeSaussure Family Papers, which are held at the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. In 1850, John McPherson DeSaussure used a system of fractional hands to estimate the amount of work that the enslaved people laboring on his plantation could be expected to perform. By rating men, women, and children as $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{4}$ or a full hand, they made it possible to sum up their labor power: The 146 people he owned could be expected to do the work of 120 prime hands.

History Vault allowed me to trace these practices forward to see what happened after the Civil War. In 1866, after emancipation, this fractional system was still in use but had been adapted to figure out a system for paying the freedpeople a share of the profits. These calculations did not work out in favor of the freedpeople: the year-end accounts showed that they were in debt to DeSaussure after a year of work. The old math of fractional hands had turned into a way for DeSaussure to extract their labor at a wage that left them in debt.

“History Vault also helped me to look at more records more quickly and thus to get a sense of what was typical and what was exceptional.”

The same record also revealed that after emancipation fewer children worked under the surveillance of the overseer: compared to records kept under slavery, the new inventories included very few quarter or half hands.

History Vault also helped me to look at more records more quickly and thus to get a sense of what was typical and what was exceptional. Though *Accounting for Slavery* is not a history of average practices—it follows the lead of many business histories in writing about the most advanced businesspeople, I did need to be able to contextualize these practices and understand which were used on many plantations and which were exceptional. Surveying many account books also helped me to find collections covering long periods of time. As I read from year-to-year, I could see how practices changed and also trace how they shaped the lives of individual enslaved people.



How have you encouraged your students to use History Vault for research and learning?

Helping students understand the cultural impact of slavery is a central goal of my teaching, especially since I offer classes in areas where many students do not realize that slavery had important consequences.

I use plantation records from History Vault in an economic history lecture course titled the "History of American Capitalism" as well as a class on the history of data called "Calculating Americans." In both classes, I send students to seek out primary sources to analyze, and ProQuest History Vault is the best starting place for those who are interested in understanding slaveholders' business practices.

I encourage them to find records and to pair them with slave narratives from UNC's amazing online collection of *North American Slave Narratives*. ProQuest History Vault also offers a terrific opportunity for undergraduate students to get a taste of research. Some of the collections I originally worked with in person are now available digitally, and as I was completing my manuscript, I worked with several undergraduate researchers to analyze plantation records.

To: The wonderful the Justice of the
Court of Session in Glasgow
The Birth of your orator's
Child's guardian of Angels is P. B. M.
Sumner and John A. H. P. H. Sumner. Clerk
of the Court of Session. That in the
year 1753 in the course of the Slaves
of Thomas Brown did take of Constance
Ann, the grand father of the aforesaid
of your orator. Two Slaves were allotted
to the aforesaid Slaves of your orator. One a
Man named Martin. (pretty much grown
in age. valued at £500. and a Woman
named Elizabeth. between 40 & 50 years of
age. valued at £400. - which Slaves were sold
out by your orator as guardian of his said
Slaves for the present year.
Your orator further represents that
The said Slaves are diminishing in
value every year, and that they can
be sold now for fair prices. Whereas if they
remain until your orator's death
which will be the age of 20 years. They will
(if they should live till then) in all
probability have become worthless, and

them. The Overseer must record in the prescription
book every dose of medicine administered.

Hours.

The first morning horn is blown an hour
before day-light. All work hands are required to
rise & prepare their cooking, &c. for the day.
The second horn is blown just at good day-light,
when it is the duty of the driver to visit every house
& see that all have left for the field. The plow hands
leave their houses for the stables, at the summons of
the plow driver, 15 minutes earlier than the gang,
the Overseer opening the stable doors to them. At 11 1/2
it is to be repaired to the nearest weather house.

to work. In summer the intermission increases
with the heat to the extent of 3/2 hours. At 15
minutes before sun set the plow hands, & at sun set the
rest, knock off work for the day. No work must
ever be required after dark. No negro will be
allowed to go ^{at night} hunting. The negroes are allowed to
visit among themselves until the night horn is blown,
after which no negro must be seen out of his house,
it is the duty of the driver to go around see that he
is in it. The night horn is blown at 8 1/2 P.M. in
winter, & at 9 P.M. in summer. The head driver has
charge of blowing the horn.

About Southern Life and African American History, 1775-1915, Plantation Records from ProQuest History Vault

The Southern plantation was at once a farm, business, home, prison, cornerstone of Southern culture, political power base and crucible of African American tradition. The Southern Plantation Records in History Vault document the impact of plantations on the American South and on the nation as a whole.

Many planters kept journals, crop books, overseers' journals and account books in remarkable detail. Family members kept personal diaries and exchanged correspondence with relatives and friends.

Southern Plantation Records illuminate business operations and labor routines, family affairs, roles of women, racial attitudes, relations between masters and slaves, social and cultural life, shared values, and tensions and anxieties that were inseparable from a slave society. All are revealed with a fullness and candor unmatched by any of the other available sources.

Related collections from History Vault:

- Slavery and the Law
- Slavery in Antebellum Southern Industries
- Confederate Military Manuscripts and Records of Union Generals and the Union Army
- Reconstruction and Military Government after the Civil War



About Caitlin Rosenthal

Caitlin Rosenthal is assistant professor of history at the University of California,

Berkeley, where her research and teaching explore the history of capitalism, the emergence of modern data practices, and the legacy of American slavery. Before beginning her career as a historian, Rosenthal worked as a business analyst and management consultant at McKinsey & Company, and she still seeks to reach a broad audience of business and labor professionals. Her interviews and essays about data, history, and ethics have appeared in *Harvard Business Review*, *Boston Review*, *TIME.com*, *Washington Post*, *Bloomberg* and the *McKinsey Quarterly*. Her research has been awarded the Simkins prize of the Southern Historical Association and the Krooss prize of the Business History Conference.

In field on 1st May 1858.

Name	Age	Sex	Half	Name	Age	Sex	Half	Name	Age	Sex	Half
Munda	56	M		Toby	18	M		Purden			
Cumba				Nam	16	M		Charity	13	F	
Moll				Stepney				Sam			
Patience				Dolly				Hetty			
March	51	M		Arch				Isaac			
Rachad	50	M		Reuben				Patty			
Flora				Riley				William			
Bell	16	F									
Viola											
Fanny											
Jane											
Creasy	18	F									
Judy	52	F									
Sander											
Lizzy											
Truly	19	F									
Henry											
Molly											
Famwell											

No. in com. 900	In field in 1850	age in 1850	Grade	Remarks.
68	Edward	42	43	Full Striker for blacksmith
72	Hagar	42	19	F
73	Ben	42	13	F
78	Hannah Taylor (20y/10)	48	18	3/4
79	Peggy	45	24	F
80	Daniel	44	19	F
81	Thomas	47	17	F
82	Allen	48	14	F
83	Ishmael	49	13	1/4
85	Hannah (Walter)	50	47	3/4 falling womb.
86	Sam	51	42	3/4 break. allow.
87	Dolly	52	13	1/2
89	Linah	53	30	F
90	Jacob	54	28	F
95	Carolina	55	46	F
96	Mary	56	43	F
97	Ezeay	57	18	7/8
98	Peggy	58	16	H
99	Sarkul	59	13	1/4
100	73 mch	60	11	1/4

30 + 40 = 60.

