Slavery in the Hemp Industry - History of the Hemp Industry in Kentucky

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SLAVERY IN THE HEMP INDUSTRY

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... Without hemp, slavery might not have flourished in Kentucky, since other agricultural products of the state were not conducive to the extensive use of bondsmen. On the hemp farm and in the hemp factories the need for laborers was filled to a large extent by the use of Negro slaves, and it is a significant fact that the heaviest concentration of slavery was in the hemp producing area. Perhaps the nearest approach in Kentucky to the plantation on the southern scale was the large Bluegrass farm upon which hemp was one of the major crops and where virtually all manual labor was performed by slaves. On the other hand, since hemp does not require as much attention as must be given to cotton, the number of Negroes on a Kentucky farm was usually far less than the number necessary on a cotton plantation of comparable size. Consequently, owing to their high birth rate, the slaves increased faster than they were needed. Sale of surplus blacks to the lower South brought welcome revenue to Kentucky and led to the unwelcome charge that peopled in the state were engaged in the breeding of Negroes for market.

Kentuckians sometimes referred to hemp as a "nigger crop," owing to a belief that no one understood its eccentricities as well or was as expert in handling it as the Negro. A Lexingtonian stated in 1836 that it was almost impossible to hire workmen to break a crop of hemp because the work was "very dirty, and so laborious that scarcely any white man

will work at it," and he continued by saying that the task was done entirely by slave labor. Among the slaves, the men held a monopoly on all the tasks connected with the production of fiber because, in the words of this observer, "Negro women cannot labor at hemp at all, and are scarcely worth anything." Another commentator a few years later concluded that "none but our strong able negro men can handle it to advantage." To a considerable extent that belief was based on fact, for the tasks connected with hemp culture were for the most part laborious and sometimes unpleasant, and such work was given to the slave or, after the Civil War, to the Negro tenant or "hired hand." As long as hemp was produced in the state, at least certain types of work, such as breaking the stalks, were largely reserved for the Negro. After years of repetition of these tasks, he did become expert at their performance, though the complaint was sometimes made that he was undependable. Among the slaves most in demand in Kentucky were those who were able to work in manufacturing establishments where hemp was turned into bale rope and bagging, but the agricultural skill which most contributed to the value of the Negro was the ability to hackle hemp fiber in preparing it for market.

On many farms, of course, neither slaves nor, later, freedmen were available or desired, and in such cases the men of the family performed all tasks for themselves. If a landowner was not willing to do this work and would not depend on slaves, he could follow the example of Nathaniel Hart of Woodford County, who explained his decision as follows: For several years I turned my attention to the raising slaves were slight from 1830 to 1860. . . .

THE FACTORIES IN OPERATION

In the 1830's new machinery was introduced in the

manufacturing of bale rope and bagging in Kentucky, though for years afterward many establishments continued using more primitive methods, depending on hand labor to do most of the work. Rope-making, before the industry was mechanized, was performed in a long, narrow building called a "ropewalk," whose dimensions varied from one establishment to another. A description written in 1873, possibly referring primarily to the walks found in New England, stated that they were "twelve or thirteen hundred feet in length." John B. McIlvaine's cordage factory in Carlisle, Kentucky, extended across "the whole square on Water street, from Main Cross to Second Cross," and Charles W. Turston's walk in Louisville was about 26 feet wide and 570 feet long in 1837 and seems to have been extended to 770 feet by 1849.

The method of manufacturing has been described as follows:

The first part of the process of rope making by hand, is that of spinning the yarns or threads, which is done in a manner analogous to that of ordinary spinning. The spinner carries a bundle of dressed hemp round his waist; the two ends of the bundle being assembled in front. Having drawn out a proper number of fibers with his hand, he twists them with his fingers, and fixing this twisted part to the hook of the whirl, which is driven by a wheel put in motion by an assistant, he walks backwards down the rope walk, the twisted part always serving to draw out more fibers from the bundle around his waist. . . . The spinner takes care that these fibers are equably supplied, and that they always enter the twisted parts by their ends, and never by their middle. As soon as he has reached the termination of the walk, a second spinner takes the yarn off the whirl, and gives it to another person to put upon a reel, while he himself attaches

his own hemp to the whirl hook, and proceeds down the walk. When a person at the reel begins to turn, the first spinner, who had completed his yarn, holds it firmly at the end, and advances slowly up the walk, while the reel is turning, keeping it equally tight all the way, till he reaches the reel, where he waits till the second spinner takes his yarn off the whirl hook, and joins it to the end of that of the first spinner, in order that it may follow it on the reel.

The next step in ropemaking was to "warp" the yarns or to stretch all of them to the same length and at the same time to put a "slight turn or twist" in them. If the cordage was intended for marine use, it was wound from one reel to another, meanwhile passing through a vessel containing boiling tar. If "white work" was desired, the tar was omitted. Finally, the last step, called "laying the cordage," was carried out:

For this purpose two or more yarns are attached at one end to a hook. The hook is then turned the contrary way from the twist of the individual yarn, and thus forms what is called a strand. Three strands, sometimes four, besides a central one, are then stretched at length, and attached at one end to three contiguous but separate hooks, but at the other end to a single hook; and the process of combining them together, which is effected by turning the single hook in a direction contrary to that of the other three, consists in so regulating the progress of the twists of the strands round their common axis, that the three strands receive separately as their opposite ends just as much twist as is taken out of them by their twisting the contrary way, in the process of combination.

During the first third of the nineteenth century most of the rope made in Kentucky was spun and twisted by hand and by the use of horse power at one end of the walk. In 1838 David Myerle, formerly of the firm of tiers and Myerle,

Philadelphia, established upon a new principle a large steam-driven factory at Louisville. The method of manufacture had been invented earlier by Robert Graves of Boston, from whom Myerle had bought the patent right, and it:

consisted, in part, in winding the threads upon revolving spools, from which they were conducted through a cast-iron tube of a diameter suitable for the size of rope required. In the opinion of officers of the United States navy and others the cordage made by the Graves machinery was stronger than that made by the old method.

Myerle's establishment, called the Washington Steam Patent Cordage Factory," included several buildings and was valued by him at $28,650. The ropewalk, housed in a frame building one story high, was 1,100 feet long and 25 feet wide. Down the length of the walk ran tracks on which the patented machinery operated as it spun the yearns and twisted them into rope. Three tons of cordage per day, or at least 600 tons annually, could be manufactured by this machinery.

A factory for making bagging by machinery was established in Newport in 1832. Prior to that time most of the bagging had been made upon the old hand looms, but the new machines turned out a product that was claimed to be superior to that woven by manual labor. The cloth was strong, compact, uniform in texture, and consistently weighed twenty-six ounces to the yard. As first set up, the manufactory could process 450 tons of hemp annually, and the owners stated their intention shortly to add other machinery for making Kentucky jeans. The writer who described this plant said that "no doubt is entertained now of the practical success of this mode of manufacturing bagging of hemp, though heretofore it has been considered as a

visionary speculation." In 1835 this enterprise employed two hundred workmen and was manufacturing wool and cotton in addition to hemp. Its total annual output was valued at over a quarter of a million dollars. At the same time a factory located at Covington was producing $25,000 worth of finished hempen goods each year.

Andrew Caldwell of Lexington invented, and in 1841 began the operation of, machinery which received raw fiber, hackled it, spun it into thread, and then wove it into bagging. He claimed that its output was thirty yards per hour, which was far more than any other loom of the time could produce. Caldwell also professed to be able to manufacture bagging for three cents a yard, or at a saving of five or six cents over the cost of other methods of manufacturing. Most of the innovations in the manufacturing of hemp were adopted slowly by those engaged in the industry, probably because most of the changes did not yield the results claimed for them. Even in 1860 only a few factories were run by steam, most of them relied on horse power, and a few were still operated by hand.

Only a comparatively few manufacturers specialized in either bale rope or bagging, and the majority of them produced both in their factories. One of the larger establishments, operated by Gratz and Bruce in Lexington, included for the manufacture of bagging a "Calender and Hemp House, capable of storing 60 tons of Hemp;" a hackling house 18 feet wide and 30 feet long; a "Factory" 195 feet long, 50 feet wide, and two stories high, "calculated for 12 spinners each story;" and, attached to the factory, a weaving house which contained spindles and looms. For making rope the company had a brick hemp house 40 feet long, 50 feet wide, and two stories high, capable of storing 200 tons of hemp, a brick spinning house 180 feet long and 32 feet wide, and a

ropewalk "extending 100 fathom," or 600 feet.

Slave labor was used to a large extent in the manufacture of hemp, the Negroes being owned by the operator of the business or hired by him for a period of time. In either case the task work plan was used to promote diligence, and the slave who applied himself could earn in the 1850's two or three dollars per week which he was free to spend as he chose. The price paid for the hire of such laborers varied according to the ability of the slave. In Louisville in 1834 one Negro, George, was hired for $30 per year, whereas Henry cost his employer $80 for the same period of time. Two years later the extremes were George, at $40, and Sullivan, at $180. "The exceedingly low price of twenty-five cents per day," was the figure set in 1836 by the Nicholasville manufacturer who, wishing to retire from business, offered to sell his factory and hire out his "thirty old hands well skilled in the manufacture of Hemp." Wishing to protect insofar as possible the valuable property he was hiring to another man, the owner of a slave sometimes required a contract which obligated the employer to treat the laborer well, clothe and feed him, "pay his taxes & physician Bill Should the Same be necessary, & return the Boy as usual well clothed at the End of the time" for which he was hired. Early in the nineteenth century Thomas Bodley and Company of Lexington wanted to hire ten Negro boys, from 12 to 15 years of age, and five men, from 17 to 25, "the boys to spin & the men to weave and heckle in a Coarse Linen Manufactory." In the same year Tom, a ropemaker by trade, ran away from his master in Danville, and shortly afterward Thomas H. Pindell advertised a desire to purchase or hire several Negro boys, age 14 to 18, to work in a ropewalk. When John W. Hunt of Lexington decided to retire from the manufacture of bagging, he advertised an auction sale of 60 men, boys and women.