

The South Cries, More Labor

DeBow's Review, March 1858.

James Dunwoody Brownson DeBow was the founder and editor of the highly influential DeBow's Review, which he published on and off from 1846 until his death in 1867. DeBow was an advocate of Southern development and industrialization. He would become a secessionist, and an ardent supporter of the Davis administration during the war. The Review, published in New Orleans, promoted the South's "agricultural, commercial, and industrial progress." By the start of the Civil War, it was the most widely circulated periodical in the South.

. . . It requires no uncommon sagacity to discover that the wealth and strength of the South lie in its agricultural resources. So far as these remain in a state of nature, or are developed in a way seriously to impair the productiveness of the land cultivated, the public either gains nothing therefrom, or reaps benefits of the most ephemeral character. A plain statement of facts will set this matter in a clear light before the reader.

1st. The Southern States contain over six hundred million acres of land, which, for agricultural purposes, is not surpassed, and probably not equaled, all things considered, by any other equal area on the habitable globe.

2d. All the enclosed land in the South, according to the census of 1850, is fifty-five million three hundred and eighty-four thousand seven hundred and six acres, or less than one acre in ten.

3d. Experience has abundantly proved that negro labor, as employed in the planting States, is best adapted to the production of those tropical and semi-tropical plants which are the staple crops of the South.

4th. Experience has also shown that we cannot rely on immigrants from Europe to supply labor for the cultivation of cotton, rice and sugar in this country.

5th. In consequence of the supply of laborers from Africa having been wholly cut off since 1808, and the great demand for negro labor in all cotton, sugar and rice-growing districts, with the unavoidable high price of slaves, planters have been placed in that unnatural and unwise position which renders it more profitable to wear

out the very cheap lands of the sunny South, than to maintain their virgin fertility. Had labor, during the last fifty years, been approximately as cheap as farming lands, or were slaves now as cheap as plantations, they could be bought at prices that would enable every enterprising man to improve his soil, and thus soon double the wealth and every kind of business connected therewith, in the slaveholding States. At the present perfectly abnormal, not to say extravagant price of good field hands, no one can afford to use slave labor for the production of manure, unless it be in purely exceptional cases. As a system of planting applicable to all cotton and corn fields, ours is emphatically in a false position.

No thoughtful, intelligent man can survey the old fields from the Chesapeake to the Mississippi, and not bear witness to the fact that there is something fundamentally wrong in Southern agriculture. To right this wrong is what the South most needs, and it can never enjoy lasting prosperity until its citizens have the good sense to find out wherein the wrong lies, and remove it.

The wise and good men who framed the Federal Constitution did not, could not, foresee the importance that was soon to attach to cotton culture in a part of the United States; nor how indispensable more laborers from Africa would become in the course of time, to meet the growing wants of the civilized world, in reference to our present great agricultural and commercial staple. Could they have looked into the unknown future, and in place of prohibiting the importation of slaves after the lapse of twenty years from the adoption of the Constitution, provided for the suppression of all the cruelties of "the middle passage," and given to this class of immigrants into the New World, every needful protection that good laws rigidly enforced can afford, the South would to-day be worth three times more than it is. Land and labor would then have borne relative prices, based on equal availability and sound agricultural economy; so that the soil, rapidly appreciating in value, because of the abundance of labor to improve it, would have been too useful to society to permit its destruction. Now, the great misfortune lies in the fact that Southern public sentiment fails to see, as the people equally fail to feel, the popular error of consuming the natural fruitfulness of the fields which both feed and clothe them.

Without laborers to cultivate and improve the indefinite millions of acres of impoverished lands, our present practice of skinning and bleeding the soil will not be abandoned for many years. The public interest demands more laborers in the

planting States; and this interest should be respected by all parties. The highest statistical authorities at the North estimate each able-bodied adult immigrant from Europe into the free States, as worth one thousand dollars to the public there. At this rate, two hundred thousand immigrants a year, give the North, every twelve months, two hundred million dollars' worth of imported laborers. Will the planters and businessmen of the South fold their arms in idleness, and say that the large area of farming lands in this quarter of a common confederacy, shall have no benefit whatever from the introduction of human, muscles from abroad?