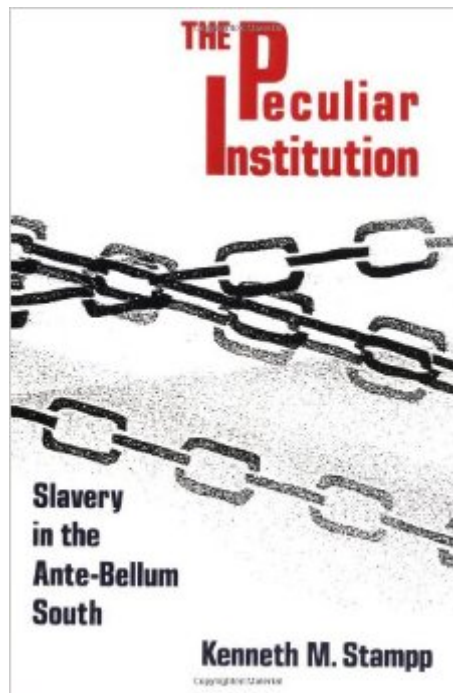


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Peculiar Institution: Slavery In The Ante-Bellum South



Synopsis

The classic study of American slavery as a deliberately chosen, practical system of controlling and exploiting labor.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Stampp's aim in writing this book was not to provide the complete and comprehensive last word on the subject of the American enslavement of Africans and their American descendents, nor to empathize with the oppressed slaves, nor to apologize for slavery, nor to echo the "voices" of slaves, nor to place it in the context of slavery around the world throughout human history (all of which are worthy topics which have been (and continue to be) addressed by other historians. Stampp's aim was to provide information lacking (in 1955, and still scant fifty years later) as to the nature of the institution itself, AS an American institution (which it certainly was up until its final (and sloppily inefficient) dismantling beginning 1863 (in the midst of the civil war). The "Peculiar" Institution (so dubbed by slave owners themselves, in secret (and embarrassed) acknowledgement of the sheer hypocrisy of this institution. Stampp does not attack the morality of slavery, nor does he "witness" the evils of slavery through statements of slaves or abolitionists (he is not writing a polemic); instead he provides us with something far more useful: empirical data on just what the institution was, how it worked, what its practices were and what putative justifications were offered by its proponents for its existence and nature. In doing so, Stampp gives his readers a far more damning criticism of slavery than any other writer I have encountered since reading Stampp's book for a high school history class in 1969. Stampp expertly strips the subject of the emotion and

bias (on both sides) that has obscured the facts (history is distinct from myth and propaganda to the extent that it is about *facts* assembled through valid inferences) about slavery.

Professor Stamp's book on American Slavery was published in 1956-- two years after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v Board of Education* and at the beginning of the American Civil Rights Movement. At the time of its publication, the book was recognized as a seminal study of America's "peculiar institution". Time has not changed the value of the book. The book attacks a picture of the Old South that attained wide currency after Reconstruction and was carried through American culture in works such as, for example, *Gone With the Wind*-- that plantation slavery was a benign institution, part of an agrarian way of life, that was accepted by both slave and master. Professor Stamp shows that slavery had an economic, commercial basis, that it was resisted by slaves overtly and covertly, and that led to squalor, cruelty and suffering by the slaves. The peculiar institution does not merit sentimentality in any form. In reading the book a half-century after its publication, and with some benefit of having read subsequent studies, I was struck with the moderate tone of the book. Yes, there were humane masters in an inhumane system and yes, there were variants in time and place. Stamp gives these variants their due, perhaps more than modern students would be inclined to do. I was stuck with the tone of slavery's defenders, pre Civil War and thereafter, describing the institution as "patriarchal". Not only is that description in error, as Stamp shows, but for readers in a time beyond the mid 1950s, it is hardly a compliment to call a society "patriarchal", even if it deserved this characterization.

In the mid-1950s, Jim Crow was still commonplace in the South, *Brown vs. Board of Education* made integration mandatory, and blacks refused to move to the "back of the bus," leading the United States Supreme Court to condemn Alabama's segregated public transportation. Morrison Professor of History Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley, and a specialist in nineteenth-century history, Kenneth M. Stamp wrote *The Peculiar Institution; Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* during the infancy of the civil rights movement. Stamp's book refutes the *Gone With the Wind* view of the paternalistic slaveowner and his "cheerful and acquiescent" bondsmen. (86) Southern slaveowners rationalized the ownership of black human beings for more than a century, and with greater vigor as the institution increasingly fell from acceptance in more liberal societies. Pro-slavery writers used "religious, historical, scientific, and sociological arguments to demonstrate that slavery was a positive good for both Negroes and whites." (383) Stamp assumes the burden of proof, and meets each of these arguments head-on with irrefutable evidence taken

from first person sources: inventories, diaries, newspaper advertisements and editorials, slave narratives, and the personal letters of slaveowners. He finds an "important form of protest" in the advertisements for runaway slaves, (110) "managerial inefficiency" not "evidence of the unprofitability of slavery" in the account books of debt-ridden planters, (391) and heartrending humanity in the letter of one slavewoman who, sold away, begged for her daughter, Jennie, to be restored to her, after their separation.

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