

The Slave Legacy

The pioneer railroad builders did not build the railroads. No officer or director did. Their laborers did the work. In the North, Irish, German, and Scotch-English immigrants, mixed with native farm boys, shoveled and blasted, hewed ties and spiked down rails. In the South, African-American slaves had constructed and repaired many of the thousands of miles of track that stretched from Richmond, Va., to Memphis, Tenn., and from Charleston, S.C., to Louisville, Ky., on the eve of the Civil War.

Railroad historians have largely sidestepped the issue of slavery and other aspects of the black experience on railroads. This is beginning to change. In 1999, we published "Progress and Slavery on the South's Railroads" by Steven G. Collins, which pieced together how slave labor "went hand-in-hand" with the emerging bureaucratic organization of the railroads. The 2003 R&LHS Article Award was given to William S. Osborn, whose study of racial segregation on Texas railroads was based on records that the author found buried in dusty agency files (see page 145).

In this issue, Theodore Kornweibel taps new sources of information to provide a comprehensive look at how southern railroading depended on enslaved labor. The railroads, of course, did not invent slavery. The institution predated the discovery of steam locomotion, and slaves were used to build turnpikes and canals as well as refine sugar, manufacture textiles, and smelt iron in the Old South.

But many railroad promoters, according to Kornweibel, actively participated in the

slave business. Flush with visions of profit, they brought slaves into hot, sickly climates to open up land for development, chiefly for cotton growing. Most disturbingly, Kornweibel finds enslaved women and children in the railroad construction camps, where they were subject to danger, disease, and physical and sexual abuse.

What has been off the radar screen of white America—the question of reparations for slave descendants—is now moving forward as a result of a lawsuit filed by the Restitution Study Group. Hearings are scheduled in early 2004 before U.S. District Judge Charles Norgle regarding a suit to force 19 corporations, including Norfolk Southern, CSX Transportation, and Canadian National, to compensate African-Americans for wealth created through slave labor. The defendants have filed a motion to have the case dismissed, arguing that it is unfair to expect them to make restitution for something that happened 140 years ago, when many of the corporations did not yet exist.

Even if the case is dismissed, the Los Angeles and Chicago city councils have passed ordinances requiring any company that wants to do business with the two cities to investigate and disclose any profits from the American slave trade. New York City and Detroit are weighing similar measures.

Whether the railroad industry likes it or not, the labor practices of long-gone predecessor companies figure to play a prominent role as the reparations issue heats up. Ted Kornweibel's article provides a timely context to a complex moral and economic issue.

