From Plantation to Factory: Slave Narratives and the Making of Industrial Capitalism

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1015EC0059

Received: 05 June 2026; Accepted: 10 June 2026; Published: 25 June 2026

ABSTRACT

The transatlantic slave trade, spanning the 16th to the 19th Century, constituted a central component of early global capitalism by supplying coerced African labor to the Americas. While often treated as a pre modern institution, slavery is deeply integrated into the economic transformations that underpinned the Industrial Revolution. This study examines the role of slavery in the emergence of industrialization through close analysis of selected slave narratives, including works by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup, Henry Bibb, Mary Prince, and John Brown. These autobiographical accounts provide rich empirical evidence of labor practices, skill acquisition, and economic organization within plantation economies and beyond. Drawing on these narratives, the paper demonstrates how enslaved labor contributed to industrial growth in three key ways: the mass production of raw materials; the development of proto-industrial labor systems, such as task allocation and shift work; and participation in expanding sectors, including shipping and wage-based labor. Slave narratives reveal the extent to which enslaved individuals were embedded in systems resembling industrial production. Moreover, these accounts highlight how skills developed under slavery were later transferable to industrial settings, blurring distinctions between coerced and wage labor. By foregrounding narrative evidence, this study challenges conventional separations between slavery and industrial capitalism. It argues that the transformation of Africans into commodified labor was not merely a backdrop but a driving force in the rise of industrial economies. This perspective, therefore, supports the repositioning of slavery as foundational rather than peripheral to modern economic development and invites further interdisciplinary research into its lasting consequences.

Keywords: Factory, Industrial Revolution, Shipping, Slavery, Slave Narrative, Wage Labor.

INTRODUCTION

Starting as a trade that enjoyed European and papal approval, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery lasted over three centuries. Slavery played a vital role in the development of the modern world economy. It was an integral part of the earliest multinational systems of credit and trade that arose in the 15th and 16th centuries. Marx describes “the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins” as a part of those processes of primitive accumulation which "signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production” (Marx, 1975, p. 738). The establishment of large slave plantations by the French, the Dutch, Portuguese, and the English, from the mid-17th Century, constituted an “epochal event as specific as the invention of the steam engine by James Watt some 130 years later” (Polanyi, 1966, p. 17). The use of enslaved labor has been presented as pre-modern, a practice that had no ties to the capitalism that allowed the United States of America to become, and remain, a leading global economy. The Industrial Revolution (IR) brought an increasing demand for raw materials to feed the factory system of production in Europe and America. The slave trade also stimulated shipping, manufacturing, and gun making, both in North America and across the Atlantic. This resulted in a need for more labor in plantations, as was evidenced by statistics. On the brink of the American Civil War, the United States supplied the overwhelming majority of cotton imports for several European countries: about 77% of the 800 million pounds consumed in Britain, 90% of the 192 million pounds used in France, 60% of the 115 million pounds processed in the German Zollverein, and as much as 92% of the 102 million pounds produced in Russia (Beckert, 2004). In the heart of the slavery system was the Negro whose labor was indispensable to the running of the system. Sapped of every drop of their labor, the Negro was drained both physically and mentally in order

to sustain economies. Enslaved people provided the labor power necessary to settle and develop the New World. Enslaved people also produced the products for the first mass consumer markets: sugar, tobacco, coffee, cocoa, and later cotton. Their labor was behind the expansion of European ports and the shipping industry to contain the excess production from plantations and other sectors. This paper seeks clues in the autobiographies of formerly enslaved people about how slavery contributed to industrialization.

This study builds on the pioneering work of Eric Williams (1944), who argued that the profits derived from the slave trade and plantation economies played a crucial role in financing British industrialization. While Williams emphasized macroeconomic capital flows, this study focuses on a different mechanism: the transfer of labor practices, skills, and organizational forms from slave plantations to industrial settings. By foregrounding slave narratives, this analysis also highlights the agency of enslaved individuals—particularly their role in skill development, labor organization, and wage-earning activities—offering a perspective that complements and extends Williams's argument.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design grounded in the interpretive analysis of primary sources, specifically slave narratives. These autobiographical accounts—written by formerly enslaved individuals such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup, Henry Bibb, Mary Prince, and John Brown—are used as the principal evidentiary base for examining the relationship between slavery and the development of industrialization.

Primary Source Selection and Use

Slave narratives are selected for their detailed, first-hand accounts of labor conditions, economic practices, and lived experiences under slavery. As contemporaneous testimonies, they provide valuable empirical insight into the organization of plantation production, the circulation of labor across sectors, and the acquisition of technical skills. These texts are treated not only as literary works but also as historical documents that illuminate the economic structures of the Atlantic world (Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

Analytical Framework

The study employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns within the narratives that are relevant to industrial development. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for interpreting qualitative texts by organizing data into meaningful categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes examined in this study include forced labor and surplus production, labor specialization and division of tasks, the emergence of wage-like labor arrangements, and skill acquisition in both agricultural and proto-industrial settings. These themes are systematically analyzed to reveal how plantation systems mirrored or contributed to emerging industrial labor structures (Creswell, 2014).

Comparative Historical Approach

To situate the findings within a broader economic context, this study employs a comparative historical method, whereby evidence from slave narratives is interpreted alongside established characteristics of the Industrial Revolution, such as mechanization, factory organization, and the division of labor. Comparative historical analysis enables the identification of structural continuities across different economic systems and time periods (Skocpol, 1984).

Scope and Limitations

The analysis is limited to a selected corpus of well-documented narratives and does not claim to represent all enslaved experiences. Additionally, while these narratives provide rich descriptive evidence, they are subjective accounts that require careful contextual interpretation. Nonetheless, their consistency across different authors and contexts strengthens their value as sources for understanding the economic functions of slavery.

While slave narratives are invaluable sources for understanding the lived experience of slavery, they have limitations that must be acknowledged. First, these narratives were often written for abolitionist audiences and may emphasize cruelty and suffering to advance a political cause; this does not invalidate their evidentiary value but requires careful contextual reading. Second, some narratives were edited or mediated by abolitionist publishers, potentially shaping their presentation. Third, the authors represent a relatively small and atypical group of enslaved individuals who were able to record their experiences, leaving the majority without written testimony. Finally, these narratives may underrepresent the experiences of enslaved women; although Mary Prince provides a critical perspective, greater representation would strengthen the analysis. Despite these limitations, the consistency of evidence across multiple narratives enhances confidence in the patterns identified.

The Industrial Revolution

Conventional interpretations of the Industrial Revolution (IR), typically situated between 1760 and 1840, emphasize the rise of technological innovation, the expansion of factory-based production, and the broader transformation of economic life from agrarian systems to industrial ones (Ashton, 1948; Deane & Cole, 1962). A central feature of these accounts is the role of mechanization—especially within textile manufacturing—alongside the growing use of new energy sources such as steam power. Together, these developments enabled sustained increases in productivity and output. Building on this perspective, Mokyr (2002) underscores the importance of knowledge accumulation and the diffusion of innovation, arguing that industrialization was fundamentally driven by the application of scientific and technical knowledge to production processes, giving rise to what he describes as a "knowledge economy."

At the same time, these transformations were closely connected to prior changes in agricultural organization and rural labor relations. As Allen (1992) demonstrates, processes such as enclosure, agricultural improvement, and the restructuring of landownership in England played a crucial role in facilitating industrial development. These changes contributed to the emergence of a more mobile labor force while also enabling the reallocation of economic resources necessary for industrial expansion. The displacement of smallholders and the consolidation of landholdings not only increased agricultural productivity but also supplied labor to emerging industrial centers. In this regard, industrialization must be understood as part of a broader set of economic changes extending well beyond the confines of the factory.

However, as Daunton (1995) highlights, the Industrial Revolution was not simply a story of progress, but also one marked by deep social and economic disparities. While industrialization generated wealth and new opportunities for certain segments of society, it simultaneously produced widespread hardship for others. Many workers experienced declining living standards, overcrowded housing, low wages, and hazardous working conditions. This duality of "progress and poverty" reveals the unequal distribution of the benefits of industrialization and underscores the exploitative foundations of early industrial capitalism. It also points to the importance of examining the labor systems that made industrial production possible.

Despite these valuable insights, conventional narratives of the Industrial Revolution often fail to recognize the critical role of enslaved labor in facilitating industrial growth. Even when commodities such as cotton are identified as central to industrial expansion, the labor systems responsible for their production—and the organizational structures through which that labor was extracted—are frequently treated as secondary or external. By concentrating primarily on technological advances and institutional developments within Europe, such accounts risk overlooking the global and coercive foundations of industrial capitalism.

This study challenges these assumptions by situating the Industrial Revolution within the wider framework of transatlantic slavery. Drawing on slave narratives, it demonstrates that enslaved labor played a central role not only in the mass production of essential raw materials, but also in the development of labor discipline, task segmentation, and organizational practices that closely resemble those later associated with industrial production. From this perspective, industrial capitalism did not emerge independently of slavery; rather, it evolved in continuity with, and was profoundly shaped by, the labor regimes and economic structures established within slave societies.

Recent scholarship further reinforces this interpretation and provides an important historiographical context for the present analysis. Historians such as Edward Baptist (2014), Sven Beckert (2014), and Caitlin Rosenthal (2018) have demonstrated the central role of slavery in the development of modern capitalism. Baptist's concept of "pushing"—the systematic intensification of labor through coercion—helps illuminate the extreme levels of productivity described in slave narratives, such as Patsey's output in Northup's account. Beckert's examination of the global cotton economy highlights the interconnected networks linking plantations, maritime trade, and European industrial production, aligning closely with this study's focus on shipping and exchange. Likewise, Rosenthal's work on plantation management illustrates how practices such as labor measurement, task allocation, and accounting anticipated later developments in industrial management systems. Engaging with this body of work situates the present study within a broader and evolving scholarly conversation on slavery and capitalism.

At the same time, this study builds upon and extends earlier foundational scholarship, particularly Eric Williams's (1944) argument that profits from slavery and plantation production played a key role in financing British industrialization. While Williams focused primarily on macroeconomic processes, this study shifts attention to micro-level dynamics—specifically, the transfer of labor practices, skills, and organizational forms from plantation economies to industrial settings. By foregrounding slave narratives, it also brings into focus the lived experiences and agency of enslaved individuals, highlighting their contributions to skill development, labor organization, and emerging wage-like arrangements. In doing so, this approach complements and expands upon Williams's framework.

Finally, the examination of labor organization within slave narratives—particularly the presence of shift-like systems in plantation production—offers further insight into these connections. For instance, Solomon Northup describes his role in coordinating work by "calling on and off the different gangs at the proper time," suggesting a structured form of labor organization. The emergence of similar systems of continuous labor in both plantation-based industries, such as sugar production, and early industrial factories suggests that managers in both contexts were responding to comparable pressures for sustained output and disciplined labor.

Slavery and the Expansion of Industry

Marx argues that;

"Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present-day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery, there would be no cotton; without cotton, there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies; it is the colonies which have created world trade; and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry" (1975, p. 99).

One important crop in the factory system was cotton. Its introduction and rapid expansion in the early 1790s triggered a huge demand for slaves in the South, and about 44% of the state's slaves were living in the back country by 1810. Thus, while rice remained the dominant employer of slaves into the early nineteenth Century, the stage was set for the ascendance of cotton (Mancall et al., 2001). The relationship between machines and slavery in the late 18th Century is like a loop. The invention of the cotton gin (a machine) led to faster cotton processing, thereby leading to increased demand for cotton. This demand for cotton pushed American plantation owners to turn to the world market to sell their newfound surplus. In John Brown's Slave Life in Georgia narrative, we see how early machines like the cotton gin are being used in plantations by slaves.

On rainy days, the people do not pick at all, but are sent into the jin-house to jin and pack. The jinning is for the purpose of separating the seed, which lies closely embedded in the wool, and is not easy to get out. The jins I have seen employed are the roller and saw-jins" (Chamerovzow, 1854, pp. 174-176).

With textiles being the first areas to start getting industrialized, we start seeing organized slave labor inside local factories being used to process raw materials in the gin factories. Even the production process has organized plantation labor. The imagery John Brown projects here clearly shows how slaves within the plantation and cotton gin factory system produced surplus cotton for shipping to Europe. The skills acquired by slaves in

ginning propelled the cotton sector into a mass production economy, thereby meeting the huge demands of industrial machines (Williams, 1944).

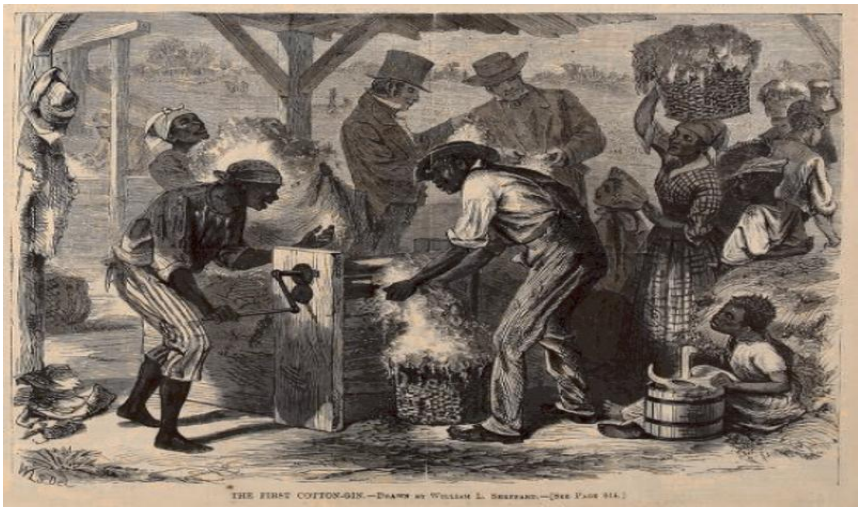

Image 1: Depiction of slaves working with a cotton gin (Source: Lakwete, 2003)

The high demand for this crop in New England and Europe led to the expansion of cotton production in the South and further increased black enslavement. Cotton, like other crops, came from slave colonies and was shipped to Europe. Cities like Orleans, Dieppe, and Bercy-Paris refined raw sugar. A substantial share of the hides processed in France originated from Saint-Domingue, and similarly, the expanding cotton industry in Normandy relied in part on raw cotton imported from the West Indies (James, 1963). Satisfying the growing demands of these industries, both locally and across Europe, required the continuous and intensive exploitation of enslaved labor. Reflecting this dynamic, John Brown highlights how rising cotton prices significantly increased the demand for enslaved workers as his narrative details the arrival of Starling Finney at James Davis's plantation to buy slaves. This huge demand caused him (John Brown) to be sold by his master and taken to Georgia to work in cotton fields (Chamerovzow, 1854).

The production of cotton brought the South more firmly into the larger American and Atlantic markets. About 75% of the cotton produced in the United States was eventually exported abroad. Exporting at such high volumes made the United States the undisputed world leader in cotton production. Although the larger American and Atlantic markets relied on southern cotton in this era, the South also depended on these markets for obtaining food, manufactured goods, and loans. Thus, the market revolution transformed the South just as it had other regions.

Emphasis on productivity was essential to the slavery economy to continue fuelling industry. Slaves had no time to rest and were worked all day and night. Also, this system of working slaves in this manner shows the factory system of hours at its early stages, which is very instrumental at the onset of industrialization.

The overseer's horn was sounded two hours before daylight for them in the morning, in order that they should be ready for work before daylight. They worked from daylight until after dark, without stopping but one half hour to eat or rest, which was at noon (Bibb, 1849).

In the fuelling industry, Henry Bibb uses this scene to show how much labor the slaves put in the provision of raw materials. While the scene instinctively demonstrates how slaves are overworked (James, 1963), the product of this surplus labor is increased productivity and surplus profits for plantation owners. A similar scene of this nature is demonstrated in Solomon Northup’s narrative.

From the time of the commencement of sugar making to the close, the grinding and boiling do not cease day or night. The whip was given to me with directions to use it upon anyone who was caught standing idle. If I failed to obey them to the letter, there was another one for my own back. In addition to this, my duty was to call on and off the different gangs at the proper time. I had no regular periods of rest and could never snatch but a few moments of sleep at a time (Northup, 1855, p. 194).

Northup portrays himself as an enforcer of labor discipline within the sugar factory, tasked with maintaining productivity among the enslaved workforce under constant threat of punishment should he fail. Acting "in the capacity of driver" (Northup, 1855:194), he assumes the role of an overseer responsible for regulating the timing of labor by ensuring that different gangs move "on" and "off" work at designated intervals. This description points to a structured system of labor coordination resembling shift work, in which groups were organized to sustain continuous production. Such arrangements were essential for maintaining productivity and are consistent with broader patterns of labor organization associated with industrial systems (Hopkins, 1982; Perrucci, 2007).

The emergence of comparable shift systems in early industrial mills—where the high cost of machinery encouraged round-the-clock operation—suggests important parallels between plantation and factory labor organization. While direct evidence of the transfer of these practices remains limited, the simultaneous development of continuous labor regimes in both contexts indicates that plantation managers and industrialists were responding to similar pressures for efficiency and disciplined production. Furthermore, the movement of skilled workers and the circulation of knowledge through Atlantic trade networks likely contributed to the diffusion of these organizational practices.

The effectiveness of such systems in maximizing output is further illustrated by the case of Patsey, whose exceptional productivity—nearly double the daily average—demonstrates the capacity of coerced labor regimes to generate surplus production in response to rising industrial demand.

An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds. A slave who is accustomed to picking is punished if he or she brings in a lesser quantity than that. There is a great difference among them as regards this kind of labor. Some of them seem to have a natural knack, or quickness, which enables them to pick with great celerity, and with both hands, while others, with whatever practice or industry, are utterly unable to come up to the ordinary standard. Such hands are taken from the cotton field and employed in other businesses. Patsey, of whom I shall have more to say, was known as the most remarkable cotton picker on Bayou Boeuf. She picked with both hands and with such surprising rapidity that five hundred pounds a day was not unusual for her (Northup, 1855, p. 166).

Patsey's ability to pick twice the amount of cotton possible for a day's work meant surplus production of 100% for her master. Her ability to meet this quantity of cotton per day implies that she could not go lower than this without getting punished. Northup notes that she is the "Queen of the field" (1855, p.188) as her skills in cotton picking are matched by what he has seen.

Evidence from the salt ponds on the Turks and Caicos Islands resembled the method of organizing labor to suit the factory system. For the salt industry, an equal number of men, women, and children were required for effective productivity: men to rake, women and children to bag and carry salt (Turks and Caicos National Museum, n.d.).

This form of organization ensures the productivity of every sex and age is maximized, with each given a task that matches their perceived physical capabilities. Mary Prince shows this in her narrative.

My new master was one of the owners or holders of the salt ponds, and he received a certain sum for every slave that worked upon his premises, whether they were young or old. This sum was allowed him out of the profits arising from the salt works… I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o'clock in the morning till nine (Prince, 1831, p. 19).

Here again, we see the structuring of wage labor within the salt industry. Mary Prince toils for about 17 hours a day while her owner, Mr. D, receives all the wages for her labor in this labor-intensive activity of salt mining. The wage system, which is characteristic of free labor being rented out to owners of modes of production, can be seen here to be effectively practiced in two main ways. The owners of slaves subcontract them to work for others inside and outside the plantation, and the wages from the labor of these slaves are paid to their masters, as seen in the case of Mary Prince above. The wage system is a very important tool used in industries to ensure that the work put in is commensurate with pay, and as such, this is a motivation for people to work harder. Another slave narrative that clearly illustrates this experience of renting out slave labor for wages is that of

Solomon Northup. He first talks of the practice that occurs in the plantations in Louisiana, where idle slave labor (caused by caterpillars devastating cotton fields) could be rented out to sugar plantations, which had a huge need for labor.

In consequence of my inability in cotton-picking, Epps was in the habit of hiring me out on sugar plantations during the season of cane-cutting and sugar-making. He received for my services a dollar a day, with the money supplying my place on his cotton plantation. Cutting cane was an employment that suited me, and for three successive years I held the lead row at Hawkins', leading a gang of from fifty to an hundred hands (Northup, 1855, p. 208).

The above excerpt from Northup's narrative supports the narrative of Mary Prince that slave masters had the habit of renting out their labor for wages in return. Renting out slaves for wages also occurs in the narrative of Frederick Douglas, when he recounts his work experience in the plantation of Mr. Freeland after leaving Mr. Covey;

He required a good deal of work to be done, but gave us good tools with which to work……. His farm was large, but he employed hands enough to work it, and with ease…… Mr. Freeland was himself the owner of but two slaves. Their names were Henry Harris and John Harris. The rest of his hands he hired. These consisted of myself, Sandy Jenkins and Handy Caldwell (Gates, 1987, pp. 400-401).

Douglas clearly supports the claim of how organized wage labor became instituted within the slavery system and subsequently perfected within industries. Mr. Auld rents out Douglas to Mr. Freeland to work on his farm. Owning fewer slaves and more of rented hands, one can begin to think that Mr. Freeman might believe that the wage system, coupled with good working incentives, is better than owning slaves (Gates, 1987, p. 403). The good attributes Douglas uses to describe Mr. Freeland show that he or any other slave can work willingly for him under such good conditions. Freeland creates an environment in which methods of increasing the productivity of slaves are encouraged, and these are similar to the methods the industrializing North is employing. Strong proslavery elements in the North equated abolitionism with the Industrial Revolution, claiming that, although slavery no doubt needed reform, many of the abolitionists' financial backers were working for their own self-interest, seeking to replace one form of abuse with another (in this case, industrialized wage slavery) and, as a consequence, gain a more compliant workforce (Burton, 2009). The plantation system gradually gives way to wealth accumulation amongst slaves as they exchange their labor on Sundays for a wage. These accumulated wages are used by some slaves to buy their freedom.

Shipping is another industry that grew rapidly during the Industrial Revolution and really promoted wage labor and skill acquisition for slaves. Raw materials produced in the Americas needed to be shipped to industries in Europe, and over time, larger ships were needed to transport these raw materials and bring back merchandise. Being a triangular trade, the transportation of slaves to the New World was also a very important aspect of the shipping industry (Williams, 1944). Slaves played a very important role in ships, where they worked in different capacities and helped expand the sector. Exporting surplus cotton and other raw materials to Europe needed the skills of men free and slaves alike. In Equiano's narrative, he demonstrates his desire to study navigation in order to raise money to pay for his freedom.

I therefore employed the mate of our vessel to teach me navigation, for which I agreed to give him twenty-four dollars, and actually paid him part of the money down…" (Equiano, 1814, p. 166).

Equiano pays a shipmate to teach him navigation, a skill he very well gets to master, and while working on these ships, he generates more revenue to buy his freedom. Here, Equiano, like other slaves working on boats, is the link between industries in Europe and the Americas for the supply of raw materials and even slaves from Africa. Slaves used their skills in several sectors since the early days of industrialization. The IR offers more light when looked at through the lens of capitalism. Slaves were able to leverage their labor for a wage even when they were still enslaved in order to accumulate money to buy their freedom. The skills slaves in plantations and sugar factories were used to pursue sustenance after the abolition of slavery.

Douglas works in a shipyard as an apprentice for eight months. His description of the place is a clear indication of a factory system of organized labor, where workers are brought to one place and given tasks to fulfill.

> ……Master Hugh hired me to Mr. William Gardner, an extensive ship-builder, on Fell's Point. I was put there to learn how to calk……. Mr. Gardner was engaged that spring in building two large man-of-war brigs, professedly for the Mexican government. The vessels were to be launched in the July of that year, and….. all was hurry……. Every man had to do that which he knew how to do….my orders …. were, to do whatever the carpenters commanded me to do…. placing me at the beck and call of about seventy-five men (Gates, 1987, p. 411).

In the excerpt above, Douglas refers to a shipbuilding yard in which Mr. Gardner had put about 57 carpenters under his employ to build two military ships for the Mexican government. The sheer number of carpenters here (both black and white, slaves and free alike) shows that it was a well-structured factory for large-scale manufacture. Douglas again goes to another shipyard where he successfully learns how to calk and becomes one of the best at his trade.

He then took me into the ship-yard of which he was foreman, in the employment of Mr. Walter Price. There I was immediately set to calking, and very soon learned the art of using my mallet and irons. In the course of one year from the time I left Mr. Gardner's, I was able to command the highest wages given to the most experienced calkers……... I was bringing him from six to seven dollars per week. I sometimes brought him nine dollars per week: my wages were a dollar and a half a day. After learning how to calk, I sought my own employment, made my own contracts, and collected the money which I earned. My pathway became much more smooth than before; my condition was now much more comfortable" (Gates, 1987, pp. 411-415).

With Master Hugh ensuring Douglas learns a trade, he becomes a master at calking and is able to move about for his own jobs in other shipyards, enter into his own contracts, and hand the money over to Master Hugh. Manufacturing ships that large requires diverse skills among different carpenters, and this could only be done in one place by establishing an industrial shipyard. Like Douglas, who was sent to the shipyard to learn how to calk, most of the carpenters and other shipyard workers there have diverse expertise. This division of labor is similar within the factory system, and the fact that Douglas talks of two shipyards in his experience is also a pointer to the possibility of many others in the area with an organized division of labor typical of the industrialization era.

Another way in which wage labor is illustrated in the narratives is when slaves work to make money for themselves in order to buy their freedom. As a handy seaman, Equiano works on ships on hire under the employ of Captain Thomas Farmer. Operating inside the link between finished goods and raw materials, Equiano uses his enterprising skills in commerce and starts a business with three pence. He eventually raises the forty pounds his master requires of him to purchase his freedom and becomes free in 1766, and starts earning his own personal wages to later become a very successful businessman and also own slaves himself.

> ….and from that day, I was entered on board as an able – bodied seaman, at thirty-six shillings per month (Equiano, 1814, p. 145).

Through skills acquired in the shipping industry, Equiano purchases his freedom and eventually becomes a successful businessman after purchasing his freedom. Distinguishing himself as a navigator, Equiano, just like many other blacks (slave and free), played a very important role in linking raw materials from plantations in the New World to factories in England.

CONCLUSION

The slave narratives examined in this study provide compelling evidence of the significant role slavery played in the development of industrialization. The transition from manual, labor-intensive production to mechanized systems was central to the gradual decline of slavery, yet this transformation was deeply rooted in the economic and labor structures established within slave societies. The skills acquired by enslaved individuals—ranging

from agricultural production and cotton ginning to technical and logistical functions—proved highly valuable and were readily absorbed into emerging industrial systems following emancipation.

From the cultivation and processing of cotton on plantations to the early use of steam-powered machinery in sugar production, enslaved labor was instrumental in shaping the foundations of industrial growth. These skills extended beyond production to include value addition and the transportation of goods, particularly through expanding shipping networks that connected plantations to global markets. As demonstrated in the narratives, enslaved individuals were not merely passive laborers but active participants in complex economic systems that closely resembled industrial organization, including task specialization, shift work, and proto-wage arrangements.

Just as industrialization depended on the steady supply of raw materials produced through slavery, it also benefited from the transfer of skills and labor practices developed within slave economies. At the same time, industrialization contributed to the eventual transformation and decline of slavery by introducing new forms of labor relations centered on wage work. This interconnected relationship underscores the extent to which slavery and industrial capitalism were mutually constitutive rather than historically separate phenomena.

In sum, slavery should not be viewed as a peripheral or pre-modern institution but as a foundational element in the emergence of modern industrial economies. By foregrounding the lived experiences captured in slave narratives, this study highlights the critical need to reinterpret the origins of industrialization through a lens that fully acknowledges the central contributions of enslaved labor.

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