



Cotton Economy and Slavery in Alabama during the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

Cotton, more than any other staple, was the economic engine that created Alabama. The search for property to grow cotton drew the first settlers into the region. By 1820, Alabama's farmers grew approximately 25,390 bales of cotton, 3.7 percent of the national total. On the eve of the Civil War, Alabama led the nation and produced more than 915,000 bales of cotton. Huge fortunes were created, and Alabama became one of the nation's wealthiest states. The wealth, however, was made possible only by the work of enslaved people. For that reason, on the eve of the Civil War, African slaves numbered 435,080—a 10-folds growth in the last 40 years. This paper focused on the growth and development of cotton economy and slavery in Alabama during the nineteenth century. It also examined their modes of resistance and survival, diet, labor, religion, education, recreation, and the roles of free Blacks.

On our way from Montgomery to Mobile, which lies near the mouth of Alabama, on the north shore of the Gulf of Mexico, we called at about twenty different places to take on board bales of cotton. Indeed, we soon found we had got completely into the country of that great staple, for nothing else seemed to be thought or talked of. Numberless persons came on board at each landing-place, some to take a passage, some merely to gossip—but whatever might be the ostensible object, cotton was the sole topic. Every flaw of wind from the shore wafted off the smell of that useful plant; at every dock or wharf we encountered it in huge piles or pyramids of bales, and our decks were soon choked up with it.

--Captain Basil Hall, 1829:309-310.

The above quote was an eyewitness account of Captain Basil Hall on the 3rd of April, 1828, whose ears "wheeled with sound of Cotton! Cotton! Cotton!" and "wished all the cotton in the country at the bottom of the [river] Alabama!" [1]. It reflects on the historical but dominant "cotton culture" of the State and the available water transportation on the Tombigbee, Alabama, and Chattahoochee rivers at the time. Without a doubt, since Alabama's statehood in 1819, Cotton enjoyed the status of "king cash crop" and played a vital role in the state's economy throughout 19th-century. By 1850, the State's Cotton production reached to 564,429 bales on nearly 4.5 million

acres; i.e., 65 pounds lint per acre. By the end of Civil War, this production increased to 135 lb. lint per acre in 1866, and to 151 lb. lint per acre by 1877. Kollmorgen [2] articulated the sentiment Cotton farmer at the time:

The hopes and aspirations of the cotton farmer were based on the cotton economy. He could understand why someone would want to raise more and more cotton, but he could not understand why any farmer cared to bother with strawberries, sweet potatoes, and most other farms products. His thoughts were as completely focused on cotton as the thoughts of the rancher are centered in his stock. A perennial optimist, he saw in cotton the means to landownership, leisure, and distinction.

By 1879, three regional patterns of Cotton production were evident in the State. First, the dominating 75-mile wide Central Cotton Belt, stretching beyond Black Belt into adjacent counties of the Upper and Lower Coastal Plain and of the Piedmont. Between 10 to 23.7 percent of the county areas in this region were Cotton producing. Second, the Tennessee Valley region that contributed 12 percent of the State's Cotton production, in which Madison County was the leader with 14.1 percent of Cotton planted area. Third, the Coosa Valley, a region of six counties, that accounted for about eight percent of the State's Cotton production. The State also succeeded in maximizing the Cotton producing acreage. By 1909 Montgomery County led the old Central Cotton Belt with 30.6 of Cotton planting area. The Wiregrass area of the southeast (also known as "cow counties") was newly developed for expanding Cotton production. The railroad development during this period also permitted the increasing use of fertilizers, which in turn resulted in profitable Cotton cultivation even in the non-fertile and sandy areas. The overall Cotton production growth during this period reached to 60 percent in acreage and 69 percent in production [3].

Early Historical Accounts

As early as in 1795, a surveyor for Spanish government, Joseph Collins started growing cotton near Mobile. In 1804, Abram Mordecai built the first cotton gin near the junction of the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers (currently known as Wetumpka). A year later, in 1805, Walter Burling from Mississippi smuggled seed of a very productive upland cotton (*G. hirsutum*) from the Spanish rules of Mexico, allegedly by

hiding it in Mexican dolls, and became responsible for its spread throughout the southeastern United States. For the first time, in 1817, Alabama shipped 7,000 bales of Cotton from the Port of Mobile, that had 800 people. Thus, even before Alabama became a 22nd State in 1819, Cotton was being produced in the fertile lands along Alabama and Tombigbee rivers that facilitated transportation for Cotton. In 1821, the State exported unprecedented three million dollars worth of Cotton. In 1838, Daniel Pratt established a Cotton gin manufacturing company in the town named after him, Prattville, Alabama. By 1839, one-half of all U.S. cotton exports were shipped out of the Port of Mobile (440,000 bales). In 1850, Alabama and Georgia were the two largest cotton-producing states, Mississippi ranked third, and Louisiana, the distant sixth [4]. Unfortunately, the Cotton production in Alabama suffered significantly between 1861 and 1865 because of Civil War, adversely affecting the State's export market and economy. In 1880, during the reconstruction era, sharecropping replaced slave labor. By 1890, the U.S. cotton belt, of which Alabama was a key member, produced the highest yield of Cotton in the world and exported nearly three million bales to Europe. In 1909, Mexican boll Weevil, the damaging insect to Cotton production, entered Mobile County [5].

The Slavery

Slaves were brought into the region even before it became the State

of Alabama; that is, in 1701, when it was still a part of France's Louisiana Colony for the purpose of tilling and plowing the land [6]. However, the demand for slaves had increased considerably in later years because the cotton crop was highly labor intensive. For example, according to some estimates, it took five days on an average to a single person to remove seeds from 100 bales of cotton. Therefore, there was a constant demand for labor. In an effort to meet the growing demand for slaves in Alabama during 1800s, slave traders chained Negroes in coffles and made them walk several miles from the Upper South to Lower South including Montgomery. By 1840s, slaves were transported by steamboats and railroads. Steamboats transported slaves on Alabama River from Mobile to Montgomery. Hundreds of slaves were brought to Montgomery, which turned it into a major slave trading center in Alabama by 1860. Table 1 shows inter-census percent change of slave population of the slave states from 1790 through 1820. In the decade between 1810 and 1820, the Alabama population increased by nearly 1,000 percent and the slave population grew by 1,532 percent. In 1820, there were 41,879 slaves (or about 30% of total population of 128,000) in Alabama, which had grown to 435,080 slaves (or 45% of total population) by 1860— or over 10-folds in 40 years, whereas white population increase by only six-folds. Dallas County, the center of the Black Belt, had the highest number of slaves, 25,760, in 1860 [7].

State/Territory	1790-1800	1800-1810	1810-1820	1820-1830	1830-1840	1840-1850	1850-1860
Delaware	30.8	32.1	7.9	27.0	20.9	12.1	21.5
Maryland	4.5	6.8	2.7	3.9	13.4	1.1	3.9
Virginia	18.6	13.7	8.3	10.4	4.5	4.9	3.9
North Carolina	32.3	26.7	21.4	19.9	0.1	17.4	14.7
South Carolina	36.5	34.4	31.6	22.0	3.7	17.7	4.5
Georgia	100.0	77.1	42.2	45.4	29.2	35.9	21.1
Florida	--	--	--	--	65.9	52.9	57.1
Kentucky	224.6	99.7	57.3	30.4	10.3	15.8	6.9
Tennessee	297.5	227.8	79.9	76.8	29.3	30.8	15.1
Alabama	--	419.2	1,532.7	180.7	115.7	35.2	26.9
Mississippi	--	384.9	125.9	100.1	197.3	58.7	40.9
Louisiana	--	--	99.3	58.7	53.7	45.3	35.5
Arkansas	--	--	1,069.0	183.0	335.6	136.3	135.9
Texas	--	--	--	--	-	--	213.9
Missouri	--	--	255.5	145.5	132.1	50.1	31.5

Table 1: Percent increase of the slave population of the Slave States in Census Years: 1790-1860

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1909. A Century of Population Growth from the First Census to the Twelfth, 1790-1900. Table 61, p.134. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved 1/24/2015 [http://www2.census.gov/prod/decennial/documents/00165897ch14.pdf]

In 1850, the number of persons in white slaveholding families in Alabama, exclusive of largest cities, formed about one-half of the total white population [7]. As for the ratio of slaves to white persons, there were 80 slaves to every 100 Alabama whites (i.e., 342,844 slaves to 426,514 whites) in 1850, which slightly increased to 83 slaves to every 100 whites (i.e., 827,307 Negroes to 1,001,132 whites) by 1900 [7].

Value of Slaves

Slave traders operating in Mobile, and Montgomery brought slaves and sold for an average price of a few hundred dollars. Men, who could work in the fields and aged 17 to 35 years, were frequently priced over \$1,000. For example, Henry Hitchcock of Mobile bought a slave by name Len, his wife and their two children for \$1,250 in 1820. Prior to Panic of 1837, James Tait purchased 19 slaves for \$16,750, who ended up owning 275 slaves by 1841. Between 1818

and 1830, a Madison County planter by name C.C. Clay, Sr. bought 23 slaves, of whom one-half were children, for \$8,844. In 1850, Peyton Burford bought a female slave of 22 years, whose name was Mariah, and her three children aged 6 years, 3 years, and one year for \$1,500; and, two slaves—a man of 20 years-old and his 18 years-old wife for \$1,750. Usually, the price of slave depended upon the price of cotton. For example, if cotton was selling at ten cents per pound, the slave was priced at \$1,000; or, if the cotton was selling at twelve cents per pound, the slave was priced at \$1,200, and so on. This price ratio was consistent during the period of 1816-1820 and 1855-1860. Prior to these periods the ratio was smaller (i.e., the price for cotton per pound was sixteen to thirty cents, but the average price for slaves ranged only between \$300 and \$600), and in later period this ratio was much higher (i.e., the price for cotton was ten cents per pound, but the price for slave averaged around \$1,600. Slaves,

who frequently violated rules and/or likely to run-away, were sold to a passing slave dealer or to a needy neighbor. Sometimes they were sold in Sheriff's auction following a newspaper advertisement: "To be sold to the highest bidder, for cash at the Court House door in the town of Moulton on Monday, the 1st day of September next five negro slaves—Tom Eubank, Sheriff"[8].

Care of Slaves

Slaves in general were taken good care, not necessarily for looking after their welfare but for the masters' own self-interest. Masters viewed slaves as their investment and therefore should be protected in order to get good returns on their investment. Health problems translated to loss of productive hours of work, but death of a slave amounted to even greater economic loss.

a. **Slave housing:** Planters gave importance for slave housing, primarily to keep them healthy thereby they could continuously profit from their work in the fields. The following excerpts from Charles Tait's journal in 1836 is illustrative [8]:

1. All negro houses should be moved every four years to prevent filth accumulations and cholera or dysentery.
2. Hot sun and fogs are thought to be injurious especially during the picking season.
3. Aug. and Sept. are the most sickly months. Negroes should never leave their house till ... sunrise as long as cotton is green (it is thought that dew on the green plant is injurious to their health).
4. Cotton pickers must straighten up at noon and walk to the house as relief. Extra rations of molasses during the picking season are thought to keep off fever.
5. An early breakfast is an aid to health especially during the sickly season.
6. In case of fever the most essential thing is to keep the skin moist and administer light nourishment.
7. In case tooth ache dip cotton in tallow and stop up the cavity. Pain will soon cease and the old tooth will eventually rot out.

Apparently, slaves routinely suffered from what is called ship's fever as a result of their cabin conditions—small, low, and filthy. The Journal of American Cotton Planter (May 1896) disclosed that "putrid sore throat which prevailed in the winter of 1837-38 was caused by the filth under the house ... 4 little negroes died of it." Therefore, as a measure of prevention, planters began building negro houses 2½ to 3 feet high from the ground, expanded to 16 by 18 feet area; with openings near the roof for ventilation. In general, cabins consisted of two rooms separated by the "dog trot" (an open space with covered overhead), where the negro dogs usually slept [8]. Some planters like Dr. John R. Drish of Tuscaloosa constructed brick rooms for negro housing [9]. Robert Collins further emphasized the importance of negro housing in the Alabama Planter [10]:

Among the first objects that occupy the attention of the planter... is the selection of a proper location ...with an especial view to health. Good water is indispensable...The houses should be placed, if possible, under the shade of the native forests... [otherwise] the china or mulberry or some quick growth should be immediately transplanted....The building should be placed two feet above the ground, so that the air can pass freely under them, and also be well ventilated with doors and windows. They should be sufficiently large...there is nothing more injurious to health or demoralizing in feeling than crowding them together.... Each house or family should be furnished with suitable bedding and blankets, for while a proper outfit costs a few dollars, they save twice as much in the end—they add greatly to the comfort and health of the slave and enable him much better to perform the labor required.

As for the furniture, the slave cabins were furnished simply with chairs, stools and beds (usually built into the walls) with homemade

mattresses (stuffed with straw or shucks). Some slaves, for various reasons, lived intimately with their owners.

b. **Food:** The staple food for slaves was bread and bacon (home cured pork). Usually slaves produced enough corn for their consumption and for hogs they raised, but occasionally the planters had to supplement through purchases from outside. The meat allotment for each slave was between three and five pounds per week. For example, Preston Brown (the overseer for S. D. Cabaniss) indicated in 1860 that he granted one-half a pound of bacon to his hardworking slaves; whereas, Randall Cheek allowed only one-quarter of a pound per day to his slaves [10]. In some cases, slaves maintained their own smokehouses and cured their own bacon. On some plantations like that of Fitzpatrick, slaves were allowed to raise their own vegetables, chicken and milk cows, sell them, and purchase basic things like coffee, sugar, tea, and sometimes, small luxuries. Some planters, like Gilmer, provided buttermilk and vegetables generously to his slaves and granted extra amount of bacon, lard, and molasses twice a month [10]. During the holiday celebration, some planters also evidently afforded delicacies to their slaves. For example Mrs. Sara S. Pickett of Montgomery, Alabama, wrote [10]:

J.W. DuBose boasted that the Negroes on his plantation in Marengo County enjoyed the best of food on special occasions. At Christmas, they had plenty of whiskey, oranges, apples, pies, and cakes, and they also had a barbecue and license to eat & drink & be merry on the Fourth of July.

c. **Cost of Maintenance:** The overall cost of maintenance of a slave is around \$24.00 on an average per year. For example, Tait calculated his cost of maintaining one negro to be \$35.00 thus: \$3.20 for clothing; \$2.00 for coffee and sugar when sick; \$2.00 for hat and shoes; \$2.50 for medical bills; \$1.00 for taxes; \$24.30 for food. Slave clothing was of coarse quality, advertised under "suitable for negroes"—long and hard wear, protects against the weather. Planters provided clothing to slaves suitable to season: heavy woolen in late fall, and lighter spun and finer materials (silk, linen, and broadcloth) in late spring and summer.

d. **Home Remedies for Minor Illnesses:** Because of the limited access to doctors, planters and overseers relied on home remedies. Tait's Memoranda listed the remedies he used: A dose of spirits of turpentine and castor oil for curing pneumonia; red pepper tea and bathing feet in hot water for treating slight colds; bathing in warm water, administering a dose of laudanum, spirits of turpentine, and oil, and plying with slippery elm bark water as drink for dysentery; etc. Generally, it was the plantation mistresses' job to care for sick slaves. Slaves' routine ailments included fevers, colds, indigestion, dysentery, and chills. Following is an example of slaves' sick report maintained by John Horry Dent in [9]:

1842—Sick Report, True Blue Plantation

April 23 Gib	dysentery	May 19 John	fever & dysentery
28 Phillis	tooth-ache	24 Bob	chills & fever
30 Tender	pregnancy	27 Violet	miscarriage
May 12 Esther	billious		

d. **Informal Education:** Formal education was legally banned to slaves after 1832 in Alabama as in other states. Bond [12], however, noted that "many master were kinder than the slave code, and that enslaved Negroes were taught by their masters, or acquired the rudimentary tools of a formal education through their own efforts, in spite of prohibitory laws." On the other hand, technical education was never banned and slaves were constantly trained and benefited from. Booker T. Washington [13] pointed out:

Through all those years the Southern white man did business with the Negro in a way that no one else has done business with him. In most cases if a Southern white man wanted a house built he consulted a Negro mechanic about the plan and about the actual building of the structure. If he wanted a suit of clothes made he went to a Negro tailor, and for shoes he went to a

shoemaker of the same race. In a certain way every slave plantation in the South was an industrial school. On these plantations young colored men and women were constantly being trained not only as farmers but as carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, brick masons, engineers, cooks, laundresses, sewing women and housekeepers.

The role of overseer: Overseer was responsible for “the welfare and discipline of the slaves, the care of livestock and agricultural implements, and the production of staple and subsistence crops” (Scarborough 1964:13). Typically, an annual contract (occasionally oral agreement) was administered between the overseer and his employer to give his whole time, attention, and skill to carry the business of plantation; to observe the wishes and directions of his employer; taking responsibility for the negroes’ good conduct, health and cleanliness; caring for the sick; and, making sure that the slaves complied with rules. The overseer was also expected to conduct himself with prudence, sobriety and faithful to his employer. He was given a horse to ride, a negro woman to cook and wash for him, and an annual wage between \$200 and \$600. The contract was likely to be terminated by the employer at any time if he is not satisfied and oversee gets the prorated wages. Exceptionally good overseers in Alabama, especially those in charge of plantations of absentee owners, were paid as much as \$1,000 and on rare instances between \$1,200 and \$1,500 per year. The daily routine of overseer typically started at dawn when he blew a horn to summon the slaves from their cabins. Should the slaves did not respond quickly when the horn was blown, they were whipped. The slaves were given breakfast before entering the field, and while they were eating, the overseer went to ensure the stock was properly fed and to visit and prescribe for the sick. Dinner was served at noon followed by one-two hours leisure. Work was then resumed until sunset, when the equipment was put away and stock was fed. After the day’s work, the negroes were granted a few hours of leisure, usually until nine o’clock. Then the overseer blew horn that signaled all the slaves to return to their cabins.

The turnover of overseers was high, and their terminations were primarily the neglect of their duties, e.g., failure to tan leather, neglecting a fire that burned a fence, neglecting livestock and slaves, allowing negroes to cut fence rails on a neighbor’s land, absent from field for extended period, etc. These rapid turnovers resulted in overseer shortages and, as a result, newspaper advertisements for overseers emerged. By 1850, the overseer inefficiencies became central focus of the planters and the overseers rebutted charging planters for lack of confidence in overseers, for exercising poor judgment in plantation operations without adhering to the advice of overseers, and not giving overseers a fair trial [8].

Two systems were adopted by Alabama planters to distribute work to the negroes in the 19th century: the gang system and the task system. Under the task system, each slave is assigned a specific task to complete for the day; and once the assigned task is completed, the slave is allowed to do what he/she wishes with the remaining time on that day. On the other hand, the gang system involved continuous work at the same pace throughout the day; i.e., never letting up or slowing down. In general, gangs were divided into three tiers. The first tier, also known as “great gang,” consisted of those with high physical strength, was given the hardest work. The second tier, consisting of less able slaves (teenagers, pregnant women, nursing mothers, old people, or the sick), was assigned to perform lighter work. The third tier, consisting of early teens, was given the easiest work. The gang system was generally considered to be more brutal than the task system. However, many Alabama planters frequently adopted a combination of the two. For example, James A. Tait, the author of *Plantation Memorandum Book* (1841) used the gang system for plowing and the task system for hoeing. On the gang system side, he assigned 300 acres to a gang of 33, who were given 10 plows, and required to work the whole area once every three weeks. On the task system side, each “great gang” was given 50 rows of cotton to

chop, those over 50 years of age given 40 rows, pregnant women and nursing mother 30 rows, under 20 years of age received less than a full task, and early teens got a single task. Slaves usually began working in the field at the age of 10 years and worked with their mothers during the first year. Some engaged slaves to work even earlier to keep them away from being “untruthful and lazy.”[8].

On large plantations weak and young slaves were given such tasks as spinning, weaving, sewing, household work; those with average abilities were used as carpenters, blacksmiths or cobblers. In all cases, Alabama planters believed that firmness in enforcing promptness and obedience save trouble and excessive whipping of slave. Slaves were usually whipped for neglecting their assigned work or fighting among themselves. Leonard M. Burford, a cotton planter of Lowndes County, Alabama wrote, “Punished Joseph for not attending to the horses—Moses for picking 14 lbs of cotton and Adam for not attending to the cows. Whipped George severely for throwing his ax at Stephen.” [8].

Some planters like William P. Gould allowed slaves to have their own patches of cotton and vegetables, on the condition that the products were to be sold to their masters and it proved quite profitable. For example, the Gould’s Cotton Book [11] recorded the slave crops thus: “David 1140, Jordan 730, Phil 850, Bill 1000, Bob 947, Peter 1050, Augustus 500, and Squire 475 bales,” sold at Mobile at the rate of eight to ten cents per pound and were marketed along with the 126 bales of master’s [8].

Planter-Slave relationships

Small white farmers (Yeomen) rapidly occupied sections adjacent to Tennessee, Alabama, and Tombigbee rivers and the Black Belt region in the 19th century, where the largest number of slaves was held in bondage. Whites maintained an attitude that “land and jobs and money are limited,” and therefore “who do you think ought to have them?” [2]. The implication was that the whites should have all the land, jobs, and money. Slavery provided cheap and sustainable farm labor. Thus the master-slave relation became a value relation through its contribution to cheapening the costs of the Cotton production.

Majority of white people in Alabama belonged to the yeomanry, who owned small estates, had fewer slaves (about five), lived in cabins containing two to four rooms with an open passageway between. The wealthy planters, on the other hand, though few, lived in palatial structures [10]. When slaves worked on small farms, they frequently worked and occasionally slept under the same roof with their owners. Such circumstances promoted bonds and loyalty between masters and slaves. Men were routinely engaged in plowing, children under 12 years took care of livestock, and women hoed weeds and worked as domestic servants. Alabama, in general, did not experience slave rebellions. Sometimes slaves were beaten for slow work, stealing, runaway, and disobeying orders. Female slaves faced sexual abuse from white men, including rape and molestation. Occasionally, slaves resisted their bondage violently or burnt a plantation’s outbuilding or the harvested cotton crop. The 1852 Alabama Slave Code designated a slave’s commission of voluntary manslaughter of a white person as a capital crime.

However, many of these blacks faced horror attacks by local whites following emancipation proclamation. A British Journalist by name W. Laird Clowes [14] explained his view behind the racial tension during post-slavery period:

A generation ago these people [Blacks], or their parents, were, almost without exception, slaves in the hands of Southern whites. A great revolution was effected. The black suddenly ceased to be a slave; and, within a few years, he was presented not only with his freedom, but also, in theory at least, with all the privileges that were previously the sole possession of the white. This rising of the black from the depths of slavery to the heights of citizenship was the work of outside forces. It was not done by the Southern white, nor, save as regards mere manumission, was

it done with his approval or consent. He was not in a position to resist the will of he victorious North. Indeed, the North imperiously forced its will upon him, and even use as its agents the very blacks who had but been liberated from bondage. This policy created bad blood between whites and blacks.

The public indignities that Clowes had come across in Alabama included: (1) While travelling by rail on a hot night in September nine penitentiary convicts chained to one chain, and ten more to another, all dressed in filthy rags, were dragged forcefully into the car and the keeper told Clowes that he was going to take the convicts 200 miles that night to work in mines [14]; and, (2) On November 17, a Negro named Henry Smith, who a few days before allegedly had assaulted one Mrs. Calhoun, was lynched near Chin's Trestle, Alabama. Another Negro was lynched near Hillman, Alabama on the same day [14].

Conclusion

Even in the face of ensuing civil war, Alabama held its stance firmly on proslavery, as can be seen from the following quote from Jabez L.M. Curry of Alabama speech in the House of Representatives on December 10, 1859.

The real cause of the agitation in the public mind, the radix of the excitement, is the anti-slavery sentiment of the North—the conviction that property in man is a sin and a crime, that the African is the equal of the white man; that he is a citizen of the United States, and that he is entitled to the privileges and immunities of other citizens.....The averment I make, Mr. Clerk, is that the ideal, the principles, the politics of the Republican Party are necessarily and inherently and essentially hostile to the Constitution and to the rights and interests of the South...If slavery be a crime against God and against humanity, if it be a curse to society, if it contain the fruitful seeds of immedicable woes, it is as idle to talk of moderation and the Constitution and non-interference with the rights of the South as it would be to attempt to propel a skiff up the surging cataract of Niagara.

Thus, at the end of the antebellum era, the dreams and craves for freedom and liberty of those who had been enslaved for generations in the South in general and in Alabama in particular, was far from their foreseeable future.

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