

Distribution of land and slaves

BY DAVID WALBERT

Distribution of land

Below is a table listing sizes of farms and the percentage of all North Carolina that were that size in 1860. We can look at this data and tell fairly quickly that most farmers owned less than 100 acres — not a large farm, and not one that would require the work of more than a few slaves.

If we want to get a sense of the typical North Carolina farm in 1860, we have to be clearer about what we mean by “typical.” This means something like “average,” but there are two kinds of averages we could calculate: the median and the mean.

MEDIAN FARM SIZE

In a data set, the *median* is the data point in the middle. If you arranged all of North Carolina’s 67,022 farms in order from smallest to largest, the one in the middle would be the median. That farm would represent the “typical” farm in antebellum North Carolina — the one that most closely matched the experience of the most farmers.

From the table below, can you determine, roughly, the median farm size in 1860? Estimate, if you need to, and explain why you chose the number of acres you did.

Size of farms in North Carolina, 1860¹

Acres	Number of farms	% of total
3 and under 10	2,050	3.0
10 and under 20	4,879	7.3
20 and under 50	20,882	31.1
50 and under 100	18,496	27.6
100 and under 500	19,220	28.7
500 and under 1,000	1,184	1.8

1,000 and over	311	.5
Total	67,022	100.0

MEAN FARM SIZE

The median may be quite different from the mean (which is what we usually mean when we say “average”). To determine the *mean*, we would divide the total number of acres by the total number of farms.

In 1860, North Carolina had 23,762,969 acres of farmland, a number we can get from historical census data.² Based on that information and the table above, determine the mean size of a North Carolina farm in 1860.

How does the mean differ from the median? Why were the mean and median — or “average” and “typical” — farm sizes so different? What does that say about the distribution of land in antebellum North Carolina?

Distribution of slaves

The tables below provide data on slave ownership in 1860. We can easily see that most “households” — families headed by a free person — did not own slaves, and that those who did own slaves owned only a few.

Slave population ³			
Year	Slave population	Total population	% enslaved
1790	100,572	393,751	25.5%
1850	288,548	869,039	33.2%
1860	331,059	992,622	33.3%

Slaveholding families ⁴	
Year	Percent slaveholding
1790	31.0
1850	26.8
1860	27.7

Slave ownership, 1790–1860⁵

Number of Slaves	Number of Slaveholders					
	1790		1850		1860	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1	4,040	27.0	1,204	4.3	6,440	18.6
2–4	4,959	33.1	9,668	34.2	9,631	27.8
5–9	3,375	22.5	8,129	28.7	8,449	24.4
10–19	1,788	11.9	5,898	20.8	6,073	17.5
20–49	701	4.7	2,828	10.0	3,321	9.6
50–99	90	0.6	485	1.7	611	1.8
100–199	11	0.1	76	0.3	118	0.3
200–299	2	<0.1	12	<0.1	11	<0.1
300–499	0	<0.1	3	<0.1	4	<0.1
Total	14,966	100	28,303	100	34,658	100

ANALYZING THE DATA

1. Was the fraction of North Carolina's population that was enslaved going up or down through the antebellum period?
2. What was the *mean* number of slaves owned by a free North Carolinian in 1860?
3. What was the *median* number of slaves owned by a free North Carolinian in 1860?
4. What was the *mean* number of slaves owned by a North Carolina slaveholder in 1860?
5. What (roughly) was the *median* number of slaves owned by a North Carolina slaveholder in 1860?
6. Did these means and medians go up or down between 1790 and 1860?

Geography and slavery

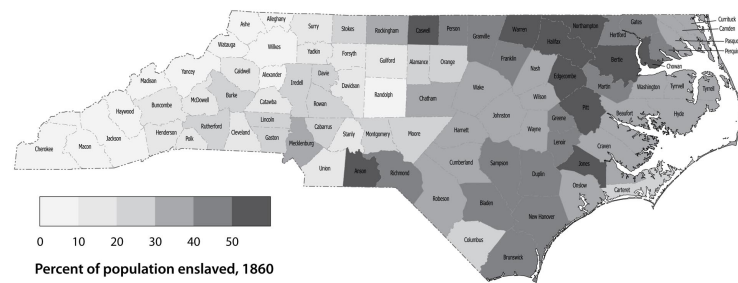


Figure 1. Enslaved population of North Carolina by county, 1860. (Click to enlarge.)

The map above shows the percent of each county's population in 1860 that was enslaved.

1. Where in the state were there the most slaves? The fewest?
2. Why would slavery have been most important in these parts of the state? What was the climate like there? The land?
3. Compare this map to these maps of 1860 agriculture⁶. What crops were concentrated in areas where there were the most slaves? What does this tell you about the work required to grow these crops?
4. Why were there so few slaves in other parts of the state? What do you know about the geography and society of that part of the state that would help you to answer that question?

Summing up

Now let's put all this together.

1. How did most white North Carolinians experience slavery in 1860? That is, how many slaves did the "typical" white person own? How many did the "typical" slaveholder own?
2. By contrast, on what size plantation — with how many other slaves — did most *slaves* live? How and why is that answer different from your answer to the first question?
3. How did *where* a person (white or black) lived in the state affect his or her experience of slavery?
4. How would you describe the distribution of wealth in late-antebellum North Carolina? Was the historical trend toward more or less concentration of wealth? In other words, did "typical" people have a bigger or smaller share of the state's total wealth?

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Notes

1. Johnson , Guion Griffis, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*, Electronic Edition , 54. Available online (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/johnson/>) (retrieved on May 15, 2008).
2. Census of Agriculture, 1860 (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1860.htm>).
3. Census of Population and Housing (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/index.htm>) for 1790, 1850, and 1860.
4. Johnson , *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*, 56.
5. Ibid., 55 and 56.
6. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/mapliner.php?id=ncaghist>.

About the author

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Figure 1 (page 4)

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