

More pointedly, if a hard-core abolitionist like New York's William H. Seward supported enumerating the slaves by name, and even demanded more information about the condition of the South's slaves, pro-slavery senators would reactively oppose him on principle.

To argue against enumerated slaves by name, southern senators, led by South Carolina's Senator Arthur P. Butler, feigned ignorance on behalf of the slave owners. Despite the evidence in volumes of deeds, mortgages, bills of sale, and probate records that packed the shelves of every Southern courthouse—and not to speak of the record books and family Bibles in their own houses—slave owners supposedly could not identify their own slaves. Senator Butler painted a picture of plantations inhabited by hundreds of slaves, whose owners, serenely aloof from life in the slave quarters, only became aware of the identities of young slaves when they were old enough to work in the fields. In this imaginary world, plantation owners—hard-headed businessmen who each managed capital investments and annual crops worth hundreds of thousands of dollars—did not keep records of the names or ages of the slaves who were their principal investment!

In specific contrast to the Carolina and Alabama senators' portrait of a South of huge plantations peopled by anonymous slaves, Senator Joseph R. Underwood from slaveholding Kentucky excluded his own state from this model of "the South." He portrayed a land in which slave owners were personally familiar with each of their slaves. These differences between Underwood and the senators from the South may exemplify some of the different attitudes between Border States and Southern States that played out in the secession crisis ten years later.

I have silently edited the Congressional debates transcribed below to omit irrelevant remarks and repetitive arguments, but I have marked ellipses (. . .) only when splicing sentences or paragraphs. All page references are to the Congressional Globe, 31st Congress, 1st Session, available at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwcqlink.html#anchor31>

On 9 April 1850, Senator John Davis of Massachusetts opened the Senate debate over which of version of the population forms would be used. Davis' opening remarks remind us how he (like other white Americans of his day) constructed categories of liberty and slavery strictly in terms of a racial dichotomy—Davis called the two population schedules the "white population" table and the "slave population" table—oblivious to the existence of free persons in the United States who were not white (pages 671 and 672).

Davis' version of the Schedule 2, Slave Inhabitants, included twelve columns:

(1) Names of slave owners

(2) Names of slaves

Description: (3) Age, (4) Sex, (5) Color

(6) Place of Birth

If a female, the number of children she has had who are:

(7) No. she has had, (8) Known to be living, (9) Known to be dead

(10) Deaf and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.

(11) Degree of removal from pure white and black races.

(12) Remarks.

The printed version of this form can be seen at

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsb&fileName=031/llsb031.db&recNum=436>

Senator Arthur P. Butler of South Carolina immediately rose with an amendment, saying: "I move to amend, so that instead of requiring the names of the slaves to be taken, the number only shall be required . . . and I now move to strike out the word 'names' and insert the word 'number.'" (page 672)

Davis: "I believe that the only thing which induced the use of the word 'names' in both of the tables [free and slave], was the supposition that a greater degree of accuracy would be thereby ascertained, and any fraud be the more readily detected. However, if gentlemen have any choice on the subject, I am not disposed to object."

Butler: "The census heretofore taken has only required the numbers of the slaves, and I see no useful information the obtaining of the names can afford. On a plantation where there are one, two, or three hundred slaves, there are perhaps several of the same name, and who are known simply by some familiar designation on the plantation. It can afford no useful information, and will make a great deal of labor."

Davis' concern was that the census bureau could validate the numbers; in previous censuses slaves had been counted among other members of each household, but if census-takers were merely to produce a separate tally of slaves, how could auditors assure that such numbers were accurate? He asked Butler, "If we are only to get the aggregate number of slaves, how are we to ascertain the owners?"

Butler: "By providing that the number of slaves owned by him shall be put opposite to the name of each owner."

David: "Then we shall lose the benefit of the classification of ages."

Butler: "Not at all. The age and sex will remain—everything but the name."

At this point, Senator Joseph R. Underwood of Kentucky rose to defend inclusion of the names. As a member of the Senate committee that had drafted the proposed census tables, he had rehearsed in his mind many times the procedures census-takers should follow to get the required information speedily and accurately. As the representative of a slaveholding state, he felt he could speak with authority on the workings of slavery in his country: "If you leave the age and sex of each slave, it will be perceived at once that the master and the census-taker must have his attention directed to each individual slave. Then, as each individual slave upon the plantation must constitute the subject of particular reference at the time, in order to ascertain the age and the sex, and other inquiries which the census table proposes to enumerate, it does seem to me that he must necessarily get the name."

Senator George E. Badger of North Carolina interjected a mockery of slaves' names: "What do you want of such names as Big Cuff or Little Cuff?"

Butler: "Or of Little Jonah and Big Jonah?"

Some senators laughed.