

**A Forgotten Story: Edward James Gay and the Chinese Labor Experiment in
Reconstructed Louisiana**

by

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Abstract

In the summer of 1870, sugar planter Edward James Gay was at a loss for what was to be done about the perpetual labor shortages on his Iberville Parish, Louisiana plantation. He had already begun to hire workers, mostly ex-slaves, from outside Iberville Parish, and outside of the state also, but still, Gay and his colleagues longed for a more permanent solution. By August 1870, the men settled on a potential answer: they would hire Chinese workers from San Francisco. Indeed, with the assistance of his brother, William Gay, and his business associates, Major L.L. Butler and Samuel Cranwill, Edward Gay successfully brought 52 Chinese workers from San Francisco to work on his sugar estate in the fall of 1870. The men and their new workers became a part of a campaign that ultimately brought several thousand Chinese men and women into the Reconstructed South between the late-1860s and early-1870s. The essay is an examination of this process, telling the story of Edward Gay's efforts to recruit and employ Chinese workers. It seeks to understand the motivation of Edward Gay and planters like him, and to further understand the consequences of a labor experiment that has largely gone neglected within Southern history. Ultimately, Gay's records challenge the widely held notion that planters sought Chinese workers as a more cost-efficient labor source, suggesting instead that Chinese workers were, in fact, more expensive and that planters were aware of these costs. Gay was indeed mindful that it would cost him more to hire Chinese workers, but he pursued these workers nevertheless, I argue, because he hoped Chinese workers would prove less "troublesome" than freedmen. This, the essay will reveal, did not prove to be the case, and in fact, Gay's experiment with Chinese workers lasted less than one year. The consequences of Gay's experiment and those of his fellow planters, the essay ultimately suggests, worked to transform Louisiana into what historians have come to recognize as a "borderlands" region.

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Part One—Towards Reconfiguring the Study of Reconstructed Louisiana: a New Lens for a Forgotten Story.

In September 1870, one hundred Chinese workers boarded a train in San Francisco. The men were bound for Arkansas where they were to begin their term as contracted field hands for a man known only as Mr. Lombard. Though the men hailed from the Southern regions of China, their newfound employer and their impending journey may have been all that united this group. In each man's possession was twenty-six dollars cash and whatever personal belongings he could carry. The cash was an advance paid to the workers for furnishings needed before or during their journey. And, it was an incentive.

Competition to hire workers in the city was high. San Francisco became host to hundreds of southern planters and labor merchants who had come to recruit Chinese workers. The demand for workers was so intense that it had taken the men's employer several weeks to collect the number of hands needed to make the return trip.¹ At last, in the final week of September 1870, the men and their new employer were on their way to Arkansas. But, somewhere between San Francisco and the outskirts of Sacramento, every man disappeared from the train.²

"This will give you an idea of the tricks these people are up to," was the closing admonition to this account, which Louisiana planter William Gay relayed in a letter to his brother, Edward James Gay, on October 3, 1870.³ This was no doubt intended to be a cautionary tale. Mr. Lombard had lost the cost of fare for the one hundred men who had jumped from the train, he lost the fee he had paid (and he had agreed to pay double the

¹ William Gay to Edward Gay, October 3, 1870, Edward J. Gay and Family Papers, 65:693, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections (LLMVC), Louisiana State University Libraries (LSU), Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

² William Gay to Edward Gay, October 3, 1870.

³ *Ibid.*

asking price) to the “Chinese houses” in San Francisco who had contracted out the workers, and he lost an additional \$2600, the sum total of the cash advance he had furnished each man. After a protracted, costly and vexing trip to recruit men for his plantation, Mr. Lombard returned to Arkansas without a single field hand.⁴

This, it can be surmised, was not the sort of news that Edward Gay had hoped to hear. Gay was the owner of the St. Louis plantation in Iberville Parish, Louisiana, and the letter that he received from his brother had been sent from San Francisco where William, too, had gone to recruit Chinese workers for the St. Louis plantation. The decision to do so was not made lightly. In fact, the trip was the product of months of deliberations; after weighing the advantages against the perceived risks, the men ultimately decided to venture to San Francisco, where William joined hundreds of planters who had travelled to the city seeking the same labor force.⁵

The brothers became a part of a campaign throughout the South to offset reported labor shortages. This movement, as suggested by many of the field’s most notable historians, likely took its cue from the Chinese indenture, or “coolie” system, installed in the sugar-rich Caribbean to replace chattel slavery.⁶ The efforts of Edward Gay and his colleagues to secure non-native workers was an experiment that lasted only a few years, starting in the late-1860s and fizzling out by the early-1870s, but it was one that brought several thousand Chinese

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Gay to Edward Gay, September 20, 1870, Gay and Family Papers, 65:693, LLMVC, LSU, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

⁶ The influence of the Caribbean sugar industry on Southern planters was an idea first introduced by Lucy Cohen in her work, *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*. She explained, “Following the Civil War, southern planters seriously considered importing Chinese laborers. In weighing this alternative they were influenced by the West Indian experience with Chinese workers and the encouragement of southerners who had lived in the West Indian islands or in China itself.” Much of the literature on the Chinese in the U.S. South has come to build upon Cohen’s emphasis on this global connection, the work of Matthew Guterl, Rebecca J. Scott and Moon-ho Jung discussing this transnational connection at the greatest lengths. See: Cohen, *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 47.

men, and some women, into the South from China, the Caribbean, San Francisco and even New York.⁷ William Gay himself would ultimately bring 52 such workers to his and to his brother's Louisiana plantations. The Gays had hoped for more men, and their fellow Louisiana sugar planters were responsible for bringing in significantly greater numbers of workers.

Local and national newspapers and magazines wrote about the labor experiment with a curious mixture of apprehension and optimism, and their pages broiled in debate about the role of these new workers.⁸ Yet, the traces of these Chinese migrants in the post-Civil War South all but disappeared at the experiment's close in the early 1870s. Perhaps because of the brevity of the labor experiment, or perhaps because of the relatively small number of migrants, especially when compared to the great transatlantic migrations of the 19th century, the movement of Chinese workers into the American South has gone largely unnoticed by historians. Today it remains outside the received, conventional history of Louisiana during Reconstruction.⁹

⁷ Lucy Cohen, "Entry of Chinese to the Lower South From 1865 to 1870: Policy Dilemmas" in *The Louisianan Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History 1: A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*, ed. Carl A. Brasseaux (Lafayette: University of Southwest Louisiana, 1996), 524-550.

⁸ Particularly useful local news sources that covered the arrival of Chinese workers, as well as planter opinions on this new labor force are: *The Louisiana Sugar Bowl*, *The New Orleans Daily Picayune* and, *Franklin Planter's Banner*.

For debates about the role of Chinese workers in the South, see: *De Bow's Review*. In particular: William M. Burwell, "Science and the Mechanical Arts against Coolies," *De Bow's Review* (July 1865): 557-571; "Gen. Lee on Chinese Immigration," *De Bow's Review* (May-June 1870): 498; "The Coolie Trade," *De Bow's Review* (July 1857): 30-35; "The Coolie Trade, or The Encomienda System of the Nineteenth Century," *De Bow's Review* (September 1859): 296-321; "The Cooley-ite Controversy," *De Bow's Review* (August 1869): 709-725. Also, "A Chapter on the Coolie Trade," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (June 1864): 1-10.

⁹ This is a sentiment first articulated by Lucy M. Cohen in her book, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People without a History*. Cohen suggests, "In the end, however, the Chinese who entered the South during Reconstruction disappeared from history. Their presence went unrecorded in the journals and public documents that had first taken detailed note of their arrival and initial settlement." See: Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p. xvi

The migration of Chinese workers to the post-Civil War South has been the subject of just a handful of scholarly works, and remains grossly understudied. Among the most notable, and widely cited works: Najia

But the plain truth is that an examination of the experiment in Chinese immigrant labor has the potential to reveal much about the South, and in particular about the worldview of Southern planters, in the years following the Civil War. This essay explores their views and strategies by way of telling the story of Edward Gay and his efforts to recruit Chinese workers. In the endeavor, Gay was helped by his brother, William Gay, and their business associates, Samuel Cranwill and Major L.L. Butler. Their initiatives point suggestively to the shared values and collective undertakings of sugar planters throughout Louisiana.

This focus on Gay and his colleagues is an admitted shortcoming of this study. The lack of Chinese voices within the story is a consequence, primarily, of the scarcity of sources chronicling the experiences of Chinese workers in the American South, particularly within Louisiana's archives. As historian Moon-ho Jung has taken care to explain in his work *Coolies and Cane*, "Chinese workers in Louisiana, like gangs of migrant laborers in general, left behind few records, all too often making their work anonymous, if not invisible, in contemporary and historical accounts."¹⁰ Nonetheless, whenever possible, the essay will

Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-1882* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Moon-ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Matthew Pratt Guterl, "After Slavery: Asian Labor, the American South, and the Age of Emancipation," *Journal of World History* Vol. 14, no. 2 (2003): 209-241;---, "I Went to the West Indies': Race, Place, and the Antebellum South," *American Literature History* Vol. 18 no. 3 (2006): 446-467; Matthew Guterl and Christine Skwiot, "Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire, and the Labor Problem in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Radical History Review* Vol. 91 (2005): 40-61; Rick Halpern, "Solving the 'Labour Problem': Race, Work, and the State in the Sugar Industries of Louisiana and Natal, 1870-1910," *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 30, no. 1 (2004): 19-40; James Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias: the Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1982); John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001). Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees Of Freedom, Louisiana And Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 206.

work to deduce the potential experiences of the Chinese workers within the story based upon the available information in Gay's records, and within the secondary literature.¹¹

Like the labor experiment more generally, Gay's trial with Chinese labor was short-lived, initiated in August 1870 and abandoned less than a year later in June 1871. Frustration with the wage labor system that had superseded plantation-based slavery had inspired the Chinese labor experiment.¹² But, as we shall see, the labor force that was meant to supplant the freedmen proved more troublesome than Gay and his fellow planters imagined. The initial affection that Gay and his fellow planters felt toward their new workers quickly diminished: contract disputes and absenteeism led Gay and his colleagues to abandon their experiment.

While Gay's experiences were not unique, his records detailing the hiring of workers in San Francisco and then the swift dissolution of the arrangement stand as an invaluable historical resource. They illuminate the Chinese labor experiment in Louisiana and moreover, in my view, suggest that the state was what historians have come to see as a "borderlands" region. This conclusion is drawn from a central question that guides this work: how does the history of the Chinese labor movement challenge the received history of Louisiana during

¹¹ This lack of archival sources documenting Chinese workers' experiences is a shortcoming of the literature on the Chinese in the post-Civil War South more generally. While Jung does touch upon this idea of archival absences limiting our understanding of the day-to-day lives of Chinese workers and the conditions under which they lived and worked, he has devoted a section in his book to providing some insight into what the lives of Chinese workers may have involved. More recently Lisa Yun has undertaken the task of bringing Chinese voices to light in her impressive work, *The Coolies Speaks*. Though Yun's study is focused on the "coolie" trade in Cuba, it is an invaluable source nonetheless for historians of the U.S. South, especially when one considers the many parallels between the two labor systems. A comparative study of the working conditions for Chinese workers in both locations would, in fact, be a worthwhile endeavor.

See: Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 206-220; Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008)

¹² The first group of Chinese workers to arrive in Louisiana was a group of eleven men brought aboard the steamer *Liberty* from Havana and Matanzas, Cuba in 1867. Terence and Arthur Chaler of Natchitoches Parish hired the men, who all bore Spanish first names. It is also worth noting that though this group was the first brought into the state to work as field hands, there was already a small population of Chinese citizens living in Louisiana. This group of Chinese men and women was brought into Louisiana from China at the behest of Christian missionaries in the early to mid-1850s. See: Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 1-21.

Reconstruction? This focus is a departure from much of the literature on the Chinese in the post-Civil War South, which has been guided by a more global framework, demonstrated most recently in Moon-ho Jung's *Coolies and Cane*. Jung's path-breaking study of how the notion and definition of "coolie" was made and re-made at the local, national, and trans-national level builds upon previous works by Matthew Pratt Guterl, Rick Halpern, Rebecca J. Scott, and most notably, Lucy M. Cohen, whose works have taken care to draw out the global connections imbedded in the Chinese labor experiment in the South.¹³ These studies are a foundation for this work; however, the essay will provide a more focused examination of how this transnational labor experiment unfolded in Louisiana, and how a more empirical understanding of this experiment might allow historians to view Louisiana as a borderlands region¹⁴.

* * *

A planter, merchant, politician, and friend to many of Louisiana's elite, Edward Gay embodies the archetype of a southern sugar baron in many ways, and his records provide a useful lens through which to understand an important era in Louisiana's history. Born in Bedford County, Virginia in 1816, but raised in the border state of Missouri, Edward Gay

¹³ These works have elucidated Louisiana's place in a global history of the 19th century. And indeed as Matthew Guterl and Christine Skwiot have suggested these "global connections were so obvious, so often discussed, and so politically meaningful in the age of empire and emancipation." They write, "...the idea is to bring the United States to the world and the world to the United States by linking its histories of manifest destiny, reconstruction, labor strife, and settler republicanism to the broader histories of Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. American historians need to consider the late nineteenth-century United States as another contested settler society, and not just as the financial and imperial power it was becoming. Guterl and Christine Skwiot, "Atlantic and Pacific," 41.

¹⁴ The essay employs the definition of borderlands outlined by Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson, who describe borderlands as, "socially charged meeting spaces where different peoples and ethnic groups collide, coexist, and redefine themselves in interaction...They are crossroads where people and their institutions and traditions come together, creating distinctive ways of organizing space and transforming the seemingly fixed edges of empires and nations into fluid transitional spaces." Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson, eds., *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*. Independence, KY: Wadsworth, 2012.

spent much of his early life in the city of St. Louis before becoming one of Louisiana's wealthiest sugar planters. Graduating from Kentucky's Augusta College, Gay began his career selling equipment to plantations for his family's mercantile business before founding his own wholesale grocery business. In 1840, he married Lavinia Hynes, with whom he would have six children, and in 1849, he inherited his father-in-law's Home Plantation in Iberville Parish, Louisiana. Building his own home on the estate and re-naming it St. Louis, an obvious homage to his hometown, Gay took over running the plantation in 1856. The plantation remained active throughout the Civil War, and Gay was able to expand his holdings during the post-war economic collapse. By 1868, he had purchased or invested in seven plantations, and by 1880 he had acquired 16 more.¹⁵ He surely was one of the wealthiest men in the state.¹⁶

Gay's success in the agricultural arena was accompanied by expanding entrepreneurial and political pursuits. He founded the commission house, Edward J. Gay and Company in 1837, which was primarily involved in coffee import from Havana into St. Louis, and invested heavily in the city's real estate also. Gay was also a significant shareholder in the Merchants Exchange, the first commodity trading exchange in the United States, and built a sugar refinery in New Orleans in 1883 as well. In 1884, Gay ran as the Democratic nominee to represent Louisiana's third congressional district, and defeated the

¹⁵ John Hansen and Caroline Richard, "Bibliographical/Historical Note," LLMVC, LSU, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/findaid/1295ejg.pdf> (accessed 15 June, 2012).

¹⁶ Much of Gay's wealth was amassed from interest on loans distributed through his commission house, Edward J. Gay and Company. As Moon-ho Jung has explained, "Edward Gay profited handsomely from those debts, accruing financial claims over a multitude of relatives, friends, neighbors, and associates." Even before the Civil War, and the economic downturn from which Gay profited, Jung explains that sugar plantations were among Louisiana's most elite. In fact, Jung posits, sugar planters were among the wealthiest slaveholders in all of the United States. Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 47, 150, 151.

former Republican governor, William Pitt Kellogg. Gay served in the House until his death in 1889. Today, dormitories at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge don his name, reflecting his legacy in the state's sugar industry and in its politics. But his brief experiment with Chinese workers evidently has been forgotten.

My excavation of this experiment continues by broadly considering the social, economic, and political environment of Louisiana from 1862 through 1870. Beginning with the arrival of Union troops in 1862, part two of this essay examines the effects of their presence, especially in the state's sugar-producing regions. Next, I survey the story of Edward Gay and his efforts to procure Chinese workers. Tellingly, Gay learned that hiring Chinese workers was not cheaper, but, in fact, more expensive than hiring freedmen. The body of literature on Chinese immigrants in the post-Civil War South has failed to directly address this issue, and the larger problem to which it points: the motivation of Gay and planters like him. Interestingly enough, those few scholars who have investigated the migration of Chinese workers to Louisiana and to the South have suggested that planters sought Chinese workers as a cheaper alternative to freedmen.¹⁷ But as the records of Gay and others planters from this period reveal, this was simply not the case.¹⁸

¹⁷ Moon-ho Jung, for example, draws from economic historian Gavin Wright in his assessment of planter's desire for this new and more economical worker. He writes that southern planters in the post-emancipation South transformed from " 'laborlords' invested in high slave prices into 'landlords' in search of cheap labor." Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 128.

¹⁸ Notable works which neglect to interrogate the motivation of planters are: Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); James Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias: the Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1982); John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001). While these works do not explicitly cite the lower costs of Chinese workers as incentive for planters, their failure to distinguish between planters' expectations and hopes for a cheaper labor force from the reality implies to readers that Chinese workers were, in fact, a cheaper labor force to hire than freedmen.

A close inspection of the correspondence between Gay and his colleagues reveals that hiring Chinese workers proved neither financially nor logistically advantageous, and the men were aware of this fact. Yet they nonetheless pursued Chinese workers. Why? I argue below that Gay persisted in his efforts to procure Chinese workers because he learned that, even if they were more expensive than the freedmen, in his eyes, Chinese workers were bound to be less “troublesome.” Finally, I address the implications of Gay’s persistent efforts – efforts which rendered the chaotic labor conditions of post-war Louisiana even more chaotic. In so doing, the state became a contact zone for planters and Chinese workers, and for Chinese men and women who came from disparate home regions as well. The movement to import Chinese workers to the South ultimately brought workers from China, the Caribbean, New York, and San Francisco into a region largely characterized by its black-white racial polarity. But the truth is that the Atlantic and the Pacific collapsed in Louisiana and, as the essay concludes, Louisiana became a borderland.

Part Two—A Headlong Search for a New Labor Solution

On June 20, 1870, Edward Gay wrote his son-in-law from his home at the St. Louis plantation and stated, “It is disgusting to have any business with negroes.”¹⁹ He was fed up, it seems. The St. Louis Plantation had once housed 223 slaves. It was among the largest in Iberville, and its neighboring Plaquemines Parish, and had been worth an estimated \$86,000 before the Civil War. By 1870, however, the slave system that had sustained the plantation and kept it in good fortune had been supplanted. The early occupation of Louisiana’s low country by Union troops and the concerted efforts by slaves to free themselves and abandon the slave system, together, transformed the plantation of Edward Gay, and of sugar planters throughout Louisiana into sites of wage labor. In fact, the invasion of New Orleans by Federal troops in April 1862 effectively marked the end of the antebellum slave system in Louisiana’s “sugar bowl,” a full eight months before the Emancipation Proclamation took effect.

To be sure, change came quickly for Edward Gay and his fellow planters. Union troops, led by the Commander of the Department of the Gulf, Gen. Benjamin Butler, captured New Orleans, the Confederacy’s largest city, and took control of the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico to Baton Rouge. This occupation disrupted the region’s rice economy along the low-lying areas near the mouth of the Mississippi river, as well cotton production up-river near Baton Rouge. Most affected, however, was the state’s sugar region along the Mississippi River and its inland waterways. Union troops set up in the heartland of

¹⁹ Edward Gay to Andrew Gay, July 20, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:683.

Louisiana's sugar country, and planters were forced to negotiate with their ex-slaves, and find new ways to induce the obedience and work discipline they had come to expect.²⁰

Many planters, including Gay, had anticipated more conciliatory policies on the part of federal troops, in part, because of the considerable influence sugar planters had at the local, state and national level, and also because most, like Gay himself, had been anti-secessionist, Union-sympathizers prior to the war.²¹ But Gay – who staunchly supported the Confederacy after hostilities commenced – and his fellow planters were quickly disappointed by the resolve of Union troops and the initiatives of the former slaves, as many slaves left plantations. Some ex-slaves looked for work, while others appropriated abandoned estates as homesteads. On those plantations where former masters remained, ex-slaves, improvising along with virtually everyone else in this time of great social and economic uncertainty, typically demanded what they considered fair compensation and a reformulated work routine.²²

²⁰ My own understanding of this early Union occupation is heavily guided by the article “The Destruction of Slavery in Southern Louisiana, 1861-1865,” edited by Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, found in *Reconstructing Louisiana: The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume V*, edited by Lawrence L. Powell, and Mark J. Southern, (Lafayette, La.: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, c2001.), 96-105.

²¹ Historian Ted Tunnell offers an explanation for this pro-Union and anti-secessionist sentiment among Louisiana's sugar elite in his work, *The Crucible of Reconstruction* (1984). He explains that sugar planters' opposition to secession was closely tied to the economics of the sugar industry. The principle market for sugar produced in Louisiana, Tunnell explains, were the states of the upper Mississippi Valley and the ports of the Atlantic seaboard, where approximately 78% of Louisiana's sugar went in the years 1834-1861. The loss of these markets would have meant economic suicide for Louisiana's sugar industry, rendering the economic consequences of secession too great for many planters. Planters' pro-Unionism was also related to federal tariff protection, Tunnell reminds readers, which protected Louisiana's sugar industry from competing markets. He writes, “With disunion, Louisiana sugar producers would compete on the world market with the more efficient growers of the Caribbean sugar islands.”

See: Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 16.

Also: John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

²² Ira Berlin et. al., “The Destruction of Slavery in Southern Louisiana, 1861-1865,” in *Reconstructing Louisiana: The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume V*, edited by Lawrence L. Powell, and Mark J. Southern, (Lafayette, La.: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, c2001.), 101; 96-105.

In important ways, some Union officers validated such initiatives. The abolitionist General Neal Dow, for example, began issuing emancipation certificates, dubbed “Dow’s free papers,” in July 1862, and General John Phelps set up Camp Parapet in Jefferson Parish, a site to accommodate refugee slaves. Added to all of this ferment were, in the view of Louisiana’s planters, even more unsettling, militant steps to ensure black autonomy: 300 black soldiers organized a militia, ostensibly under the command of General Phelps, and in the summer of 1862, free persons of color and ex-slaves began to enlist in the Union Army.²³ By October 1862, most ex-slaves had demanded their freedom, and sugar planters loyal to the Union had little choice but to yield. Though Edward Gay and his fellow planters were able to maintain ownership of their estates during the early stages of Union occupation, little else remained the same.²⁴

General Butler’s departure from New Orleans in 1863 only served to quicken the pace of change in Louisiana’s sugar regions. His successor, Gen. Nathaniel Banks, effectively quashed Edward Gay and sugar planters’ last hopes for the restoration of chattel slavery when, in January 1863, he issued General Order 12. The order forbade “the forcible seizure of fugitives from services of labor by their owners or by military authorities,” and sought to establish a “yearly system of negro labor.” It specified that employers were responsible for providing “food, clothing [and] proper treatment” for workers, as well as “just compensation,” which could take the form of a fixed rate or an equitable portion of the yearly crop.²⁵ This new order would take effect on Gay’s St. Louis plantation in February 1863, when he received an important notice from the Department of the Gulf’s Sequestration

²³ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 96-105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

Commission. The commission informed Gay that he was to pay ex-slaves “induced” by Union officers to return to their former plantations, a twentieth of the value of the crop, or a set amount for their work. In effect, then, the commission envisioned a system of agricultural production based either on wages or on sharecropping. Which system would prevail was an open question.²⁶

No matter the ultimate answer, the initiatives of the commission plainly assaulted the very foundation of the state’s antebellum labor system in the eyes of Edward Gay and his fellow planters. The master-slave relationship was to be replaced with that of employer-employee, the wage system, or with that of planter-cropper and sharecropping. In the case of Gay and his fellow sugar planters, the wage system came to prevail, largely due to the specific demands of sugar cultivation. The sheer logistics of dividing the crop at the end of the season rendered sharecropping impracticable on sugar plantations. And more significantly, sugar cultivation did not lend itself to a de-centralized plantation system. Instead, it required a centralized plantation regime with a large workforce.²⁷ The strict schedule of production, particularly during the spring planting and the fall harvest required a steady and disciplined labor force that “worked with clocklike precision.”²⁸ The fragmented nature of sharecropping, therefore, was unsuitable for sugar production.

Thus, the rigid demands of sugar cultivation, combined with the Sequestration Commission’s order, effectively forced Gay to compensate his workers with monthly wages

²⁶ Department of the Gulf, Headquarters, U.S. Sequestration Commission, letter to Edward Gay, February 20, 1863, Gay Papers, 45.

²⁷ John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

In this work, Rodrigue is careful to distinguish his recognition of the unique demands of sugar cultivation from a sort of “crop determinism,” but insists that the unique nature of sugar production did impact the transition from slave to wage labor in Louisiana’s “sugar bowl.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92, 78-104.

beginning in spring 1863. Not long after, General Banks went on to promulgate another order, General Order 23, which increased these wages. Subsequently, in September 1864, Louisiana Unionists approved a state constitution, which formally abolished slavery. Thus, even before the end of the Civil War, Louisiana's planter class was forced to recognize the tides of what seemed like monumental change: they had to acknowledge not only the abolition of slavery but moreover that the state could regulate wages. Gay himself acknowledged all of this: in February 1865, Edward Gay drew up formal contracts with his workers.²⁹

For five years, Gay and his workers negotiated a thorny relationship – so thorny, in fact, that by 1870 Gay was ready to abandon what he considered to be a broken system. Gay's chief complaints about the wage labor system that had persisted in Louisiana's "sugar bowl" were the perpetual labor shortage on his plantation and his lack of control over workers.³⁰ Indeed, labor shortages were a problem that plagued much of the South in the

²⁹ Hansen & Richard, "Bibliographical/Historical Note."

³⁰ It is worthwhile to note that the wage labor system did not persist in much of Louisiana. Instead, sharecropping became the predominant mode of labor contract between planters and freedmen, particularly in cotton-producing regions. The best explanation for this shift away from wage labor was freedmen's discontent working under conditions so similar to that of the antebellum plantation system, most notably in work-gangs, under the watchful eye of an overseer.

See: John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001)
; Rick Halpern, "Solving the 'Labor Problem:' Race, Work and the State in the Sugar Industries of Louisiana and Natal, 1870-1910," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, no. 1 (2004): 19-40; Rebecca J. Scott, "Defining the Boundaries of Freedom in the World of Cane: Cuba, Brazil, and Louisiana after Emancipation," *The American Historical Review*, 99, no. 1 (1994): 70-102.

Some notable works about the system of sharecropping which prevailed in much of the South include: Ronald L.F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labour: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); Stanley Engerman, "The Economic Response to Emancipation and Some Economic Aspects of the Meaning of Freedom" in *The Meaning of Freedom*, edited by Frank McGlynn and Seymour Drescher, 49-68 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992); Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984); Robert William Fogel, *Time on the Cross* (Boston: Little Brown, 1974); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* (New York: Random House, 1979); Jay R. Mandle, *Roots of Black Poverty: the Southern plantation economy after the Civil War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978); Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) Michael Wayne, *The reshaping of plantation society: the*

years after the war. They were due, in part, by casualties suffered by black soldiers in battle, and also because many freed women and children declined fieldwork, and those who did resume work on plantations refused to work under the same backbreaking conditions that had sustained the antebellum sugar economy³¹. This was a problem for Edward Gay. He expected his workers to labor with the same “esprit de corps” as they had under slavery, and he expected them to do so at the lowest possible cost. And, in 1870, he concluded that freedmen could not fulfill his criteria.

But the truth was that, even prior to 1870, Gay and his colleagues had begun hiring workers from outside of Iberville Parish to supplement the work force. These workers came primarily from New Orleans and parts of Virginia, but as correspondence between Gay and his colleagues in the summer of 1870 reveal, the men were wholly dissatisfied with both parties. In one letter, Gay’s son, Andrew, described workers from Virginia as “too uncertain” while complaining that those hired from New Orleans did not stay “any length of time.”³² Edward Gay, too, had grown disenchanted. Just a month before receiving his son’s letter of complaint, Gay had written his brother, William, and expressed similar irritation. In the note, he warned that if a new group of freedmen hired to chop wood did not remain, “then the whole business of supplying negro labor from this city had better be abandoned, as you suggest.”³³

The notes between the men reveal that they were frustrated most by those workers who they considered unreliable and prone to absenteeism. But a letter written by Edward Gay

Natchez district, 1860-1880 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

³¹ Rodrigue, *Reconstruction*, 90.

³² Andrew Gay to Edward Gay, August 13, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:684.

³³ Edward Gay to Samuel Cranwill, August 6, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:684.

in July 1870 suggests that his dissatisfaction may have had other sources. In the letter to his son-in-law, Major L.L. Butler, Gay complained that just a week before, five men who had been hired to chop wood on the St. Louis plantation had abandoned the task before it was completed. The issue had been over wages, he explained. The workers had been promised \$1.25 per cord for their services, but upon receiving only \$1 per cord, refused to work until they were paid the promised wage. The incident is revealing, as the problem, it seems, was not that the freedmen hired to chop wood had refused to work, but rather, that they had the audacity to expect that Gay's overseer would honor the terms of their contracts. About the dispute, Gay had only this to say: "The overseer should not have told them they were only to be paid \$1." Gay was upset that the workers had left, to be sure, but as his response to Butler suggests, he was more upset by the reality that it would cost him more money to retain the services of freedmen. As his terse, semi-sensical remark suggested, he had no answer for the problem.³⁴

Like most planters, then, Gay was interested in a less costly form of labor. He routinely complained about the costs associated with hiring freedmen, and he accused railroad companies and his fellow planters of driving up wages. It is therefore not surprising that Gay's interest was piqued when he heard of a possible alternative to freedmen. Interestingly, news of this alternative labor came first in the form of a warning from Samuel Cranwill, Gay's plantation manager. In a letter, Cranwill informed Gay that John Burnside, perhaps the wealthiest sugar planter in Louisiana, and the owner of the Houmas Plantation, had called to introduce them to the labor merchant Vernon Seamon. Seamon was about to travel to Hong Kong to bring Chinese laborers back to New Orleans, Cranwill explained, and

³⁴ Edward Gay to Major L.L. Butler, July 30, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:684.

had called to see if Gay were interested in sending for men. The terms of the contract for each worker was three to five years of service and a monthly salary of \$8, plus a \$200 commission fee to Seamon at the time of delivery. While Cranwill took the care to pass along the details of the arrangement in the letter, in the end he argued against sending for any men. He advised:

It would take about two years in the difference of labor wages to make good on the \$200 in currency bonuses paid on delivery here—and the risk of their dying or leaving unceremoniously before that time, makes the risk greater than the prospective advantages, not to speak of their inefficient labor compared with negroes.³⁵

Cranwill's calculations must have struck Gay as compelling. But just days later Gay received a note about Chinese workers from his son, Andrew, who wrote in a decidedly different tone:

I think it will be very difficult to get any extra labor about here for taking of the crop and they will demand high wages. I am told people are offering \$50, +\$60 per month, plus feeding them. I think it would be cheaper to send for Chinese from San Francisco at once.³⁶

Gay went on to explain that it would cost \$14 per worker, plus an additional \$10 for transportation costs. Nonetheless, Andrew Gay explained, “I think that it is cheaper than sending to Va. for negroes as they are so uncertain after you get them and it costs just as much.”³⁷

It was this sort of “uncertainty” that proved decisive in the Gays' efforts to find a new and ostensibly more “reliable” work force. For just a day or two later, Edward Gay received a letter from Major L.L. Butler that made this very argument. As Butler asked, in reference to Chinese workers and a well-known labor merchant, “Do you think the Chinese

³⁵ Samuel Cranwill to Edward J. Gay, August 11, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:685.

³⁶ Andrew Gay to Edward Gay, August 13, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:686.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

offer inducement at present, are they not better than green negroes at 100 a piece with a H.K. Hauman contract?"³⁸

All of this correspondence suggests that even as Gay and his associates seemed uncertain about what was best for the plantation, they had grown utterly convinced that they wanted a reliable and affordable workforce. The question was this: how best to secure such a workforce. While Gay received endorsements to hire Chinese workers from his son Andrew and son-in-law Major L.L. Butler, he continued to receive stern warnings from Samuel Cranwill. In fact, upon learning that Edward Gay had begun to make inquiries about sending for Chinese workers, Cranwill warned him: "...we trust you will have nothing to do with the "Pigtail" question more than to investigate it. Planters who have tried Chinese labor have had a surfeit of it, from all we hear."³⁹ While it is uncertain how Edward Gay replied to this cautionary epistle, it is clear that he had been warned of the uncertainty and that he was aware of the risks.

Given Gay's next move, only one inference about his thinking seems likely: that while there was no guarantee that Chinese workers would prove cheaper and more tractable than the freedmen, it was well worth the risk to find out. That it was testifies to how troublesome Gay's relationship with his workers had become. So, in late August 1870, Gay dispatched his brother William to San Francisco in search of new workers. Significantly, William quickly learned that hiring Chinese workers would not prove less difficult than hiring freedmen. In fact, William Gay's experiences in San Francisco undeniably pointed to the conclusion that, from what we take to be the perspective of market-oriented businessmen, the experiment in Chinese labor should have been abandoned even as it was begun.

³⁸ Major L.L. Butler to Edward Gay, August 14 1870, Gay Papers, 64:684.

³⁹ Samuel Cranwill to Edward J. Gay, September 3, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:689.

William Gay, for one, captured in a series of letters from San Francisco the daunting complexities of procuring Chinese workers. In late September 1870, he wrote to Edward Gay: “Dear Brother, my whole time since reaching the city has been employed in endeavoring to secure the labor I came to get, but up to this time have nothing satisfactory to report.” Referring to some Chinese workers, William Gay went on to explain, “It appears exceedingly difficult to induce them to break off and go a long way off from their friends, away with people whom they are afraid will treat them badly.”⁴⁰ It was not a buyer’s market in San Francisco, Gay concluded, as the city was full of planters and labor merchants – and none that he met had much luck in collecting workers.⁴¹ William Gay went so far as to retain the services of a Dutch labor merchant, Cornelius Koopmanschap, arguably the continent’s leading agent for obtaining Chinese workers.⁴² But, still, William Gay had little good news to send home.⁴³

⁴⁰ William Gay to Edward J. Gay, September 20, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:691.

⁴¹ In particular, planters and labor merchants seemed to have the most difficulty keeping workers who had agreed to go back to work for them. William complained that even when merchants were able to contract a group of workers, there was no guarantee the men would stick around long enough to board a train out of the city. He wrote Edward Gay and explained, “Nearly any of the agents will possess the ability to get the hands, but no one has them or has any control of them after they have been persuaded to come together for shipment, some agent will get an unfavorable report of their employer or prospective treatment and they will scatter off at once.”

Ibid.

⁴² Born in Holland in 1828, Cornelius Koopmanschap arrived in San Francisco in 1851 hoping to profit from the California gold rush. He quickly became a recognized figure in the Chinese labor trade for his connections with labor brokers in Hong Kong as well as parts of China. He worked closely with labor brokers to gather workers and have them shipped to San Francisco. He attended the Chinese Labor Convention in July 1869, and was a well-known importer of Chinese labor in the South. Though little is known about Cornelius Koopmanschap, he has appeared in many books about the history of Chinese migration in America, particularly migration into the South.

For information about Cornelius Koopmanschap, see: Leslie Bo, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York: NYU Press, 2010): pp. 34-35; Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984): pp. 67-70, 89-95, 120-22, 180-81, vii; Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008): pp. 150, 163-64; Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998): pp. 31-36, 47, 60-61, 272.; Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006): pp. 102-3, 106, 110, 113-19, 123-24, 153-56, 160, 162, 166, 196-97; Yucheng Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China's Policy Toward Exclusion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), pp. 24, 40-41, 58, 69, 76; Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The*

The correspondence between Edward Gay and his brother demonstrates that the task of hiring Chinese workers in San Francisco would prove no less difficult than hiring freedmen in Louisiana. Far more complicated than simply arriving in San Francisco and hiring Chinese workers, the task at hand became amazingly complex. William Gay learned that he was obligated to confront a large number of intermediaries and a intricate system with which he was wholly unfamiliar. He was forced to negotiate with Chinese workers and their “headsmen,” who were familiar enough with the system to make demands, with labor merchants such as Koopmanschap, who were making promises they could not keep, and with other planters whom William simultaneously relied upon for information but with whom he also competed.⁴⁴

Most exasperating, in the view of William Gay, must have been what seemed like a cheeky, nervy demand from potential employees that he, like other planters, supply satisfactory references from the Bank of California – as well as half a month’s salary, paid in advance, prior to leaving San Francisco. But even after he complied with such requests, William Gay was able to make no real progress in hiring workers. As he concluded in a letter sent to Edward Gay, “no orders have been filled by any parties since I reached this city and thus is but a slim prospect at present, I think.”⁴⁵

Mississippi Chinese (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1982); pp. 5-6; Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong*, (Aberdeen: Hong Kong University Press, 2012): pp. 114-118, 153.

⁴³ William Gay to Edward J. Gay, September 21, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:691.

⁴⁴ William Gay’s frustration with the process of hiring Chinese workers is clear in his correspondence with Edward Gay. He was especially frustrated with the Chinese workers for-hire and their representatives known as “headsmen.” In one letter he complained, “These China headsmen are the sharpest of the sharp and want everything their own way, trusting no one and wanting security here that the wages will be paid and contract carried out.”

See: William Gay to Edward J. Gay, September 20, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:691.

⁴⁵ William Gay to Edward J. Gay, September 26, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:692.

But even if the Gays at this stage had been successful in finding Chinese workers, there were many indications that such workers would prove to be “difficult” employees. And William Gay himself provided his brother with accounts about Chinese workers “scattering” after being gathered to leave the city, sometimes with cash advances. Edward Gay, then, was again – and again –reminded of the risks in his venture. Samuel Cranwill reiterated his plea that Gay send for freedmen from Virginia, and that he forget about Chinese workers who, as Cranwill explained, were “not to be depended on.”⁴⁶ At this very juncture, the Georgia planter, H.B. Rivers, warned Gay that the prospects of procuring Chinese workers had “changed for the worst.”⁴⁷ Yet these warnings failed to deter either of the Gay brothers, and William Gay continued the search. Finally, three weeks after arriving in San Francisco, William Gay wrote Edward with some hopeful news: “Am almost certain of getting off a shipment of Chinese tomorrow—Koopmanschap says he has something near seventy ready and is afraid they will not remain until he can collect the full number wanted.... The number shipped tomorrow will of course embrace every available man which I accept....”⁴⁸

In the end William was able to sign 52 workers at the cost of \$65 dollars per man. The total cost of hiring the 52 men therefore was approximately \$4832, no small sum in 1870, and a sum the Gays would lose within seven months of the arrival of Chinese workers. The steep cost incurred is yet another telling peculiarity in the story of Edward Gay’s efforts to hire Chinese workers. Such efforts stand as a suggestive testament of the Gays’ determination to replace the freedmen at a cost which seems non-rational, and with a

⁴⁶ Samuel Cranwill to Edward J. Gay, September 29, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:692.

⁴⁷H.B. Rivers to Edward Gay, October 6, 1870, Gay Papers, 65:694.

⁴⁸ William Gay to Edward Gay, October 3, 1870, Gay Papers, 64:685.

personal, steely, and unwavering commitment to invent nothing less than a new social order in the sugar bowl.

Part Three—Disillusionment and Dissolution

The Gays' efforts to secure a new permanent workforce and to command it in much the same manner as they had commanded their slaves began auspiciously enough.⁴⁹ Indeed, for a brief period, the brothers were pleased with their prospects. A letter from William Gay sent approximately four months after the arrival of the first Chinese workers to Iberville Parish points to the men's initial satisfaction. He wrote: "(we) ... find the Chinese well adapted. We are trying them by task work and find they can do a good days work, about as quick as the negro."⁵⁰ In the same letter William Gay noted that a Sunday school had been built on his Oaks plantation for his new workers, and he reminded Edward Gay that with the Chinese New Year approaching, there would be a need to grant their workers a few days off. Clearly, the Gays wanted for the arrangement to succeed, as evidenced by their willingness to accommodate the cultural celebration of their new workers. But, much to their disappointment, the amicable relationship with their Chinese workers soon changed.⁵¹

⁵⁰ William Gay to Edward Gay, February 13 1871, Gay Papers, 67:716.

⁵¹ Though Gay left very little record of the living conditions and experiences of Chinese workers hired to work on the St. Louis plantation, the stipulations of the work contracts between Gay and his workers shed some light on the arrangement. Chinese workers were to be paid \$16 per month for every 26 days worked, payable monthly. Gay was responsible for furnishing the men with rice, pork, fish or beef, vegetables and tea, fuel, good quarters. Planter Thomas J. Shaffer provided details of the living arrangements for Chinese workers on his sugar plantation in a news article in the *Louisiana Sugar Bowl*. He told the newspaper "Instead of having to give each man a separate house, I gave the 26 men two houses, 20 by 40 feet, and they have ample room, and are contented. I have another house 16 by 18, in which all their cooking and cleaning is done. One regular cook does all the cooking and policing of quarters, and prepares both cold and warm baths, which every man uses twice a day." Descriptions like these give us some idea of what conditions were like on sugar plantations for Chinese workers, but relying on planters' perspectives for these descriptions is problematic. Insights from Chinese workers remain sparse in the records. See: *Louisiana Sugar Bowl*, June 14, 1871.

As is generally recognized by historians of the South, conditions on sugar plantations were arguably some of the worst in the agricultural arena, during the antebellum period and afterwards. Work was physically demanding, dangerous and required strenuous work yearlong. Given the particularly harsh working conditions on sugar plantations, it is not surprising then that most Chinese workers did not remain on sugar plantations. There are records of Chinese work stoppages and a few incidents of violence erupting between Chinese workers and overseers over mistreatment, and accusations by Chinese workers that terms of contract were not being adhered to. Chinese perspectives were rarely captured in these reports of worker-employer conflict, though a rare news

The evidence of this transformation is clear in the brothers' correspondence, as their contented talk of "well adapted" laborers turned to irritated debates about the proper solution for repeated issues with runaway workers. On June 22, 1871— just seven months after the workers had arrived — Major L.L. Butler, Edward Gay's son-in-law, wrote with bad news. Couched between a discussion of potato sales and a broken boiler head, Butler explained that "the Chinese all left this morning early."⁵² This short and dispassionate note marked the disappointing end of a nearly year-long effort to hire Chinese workers, and would, in fact, be the last mention of Chinese workers to be found in the correspondence records of Edward Gay and his business associates.

Just as they had disappeared from the fields, and from the records of many of Louisiana's planters, the workers on Edward Gay's plantations left also. Though the news must have been disappointing to Gay and his colleagues, it did not come as a complete shock. In fact, the news of the Chinese workers' departure came only two months after Edward Gay had sued eight of his workers for breach of contract.⁵³ The suit was filed against the men for repeated absenteeism, and Gay had demanded compensation for the expenses accrued in their transportation and employment. The problem of absenteeism, it seems, had become commonplace for both Edward and William Gay. In fact, correspondence between the brothers in the months leading up to the final dissolution of the labor arrangement was rife with complaints. In one letter, William Gay wrote his brother and cautioned about the supposed duplicitous nature of their new workers, warning, "If permitted to go off and hire

article chronicling one Chinese workers account of a violent break out on a Lafourche Parish sugar plantation is cited in Moon-ho Jung's *Coolies and Cane*.

See: Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 188; *New Iberia Louisiana Sugar Bowl*, August 31, October 5, 1871.

For conditions on sugar plantations in Louisiana, see: Walter Prichard, "Louisiana Sugar Plantation under the Slavery Regime," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 14, no. 2 (1927), 168-178.

⁵² Edward Gay to William Gay, June 22, 1870, Gay Papers, 69:743.

⁵³ Legal documents, April 26, 1871, Gay Papers, 68:731.

out whenever they are compelled to do right and work satisfactorily, then they will all soon disappear.”⁵⁴ He advised his brother to have his absentee workers arrested on the grounds of “obtaining money under false pretense” and urged him to “come up and straighten these Celestials.”⁵⁵

But before Edward Gay could “straighten up” any workers, as his brother suggested, three more of his workers left his plantation. The news of this breach of contract came in another letter from William Gay, who informed his brother that he had found the men loitering at the plantation’s ferry terminal. In the note, he told his brother that the men had agreed to resume work the next morning, but explained that “our intention is not to pay again until each man works 26 days and pays in addition for his board.” Ominously, he added: “will try to get even with them somehow.” In the end, though, the Gays were reluctant to retaliate too forcefully, and seemed unsure about how best to deal with their labor problems. Much to the dismay of Edward and William Gay, however, circumstances did not improve. In fact, the friction between William Gay’s overseer and his Chinese workers became so intense that he was forced to sell off the contracts for his workers, and the workers on Edward Gay’s plantation left slowly until, finally, none remained.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ William Gay to Edward Gay, March 20, 1871, Gay Papers, 67:722.

⁵⁵ “Celestials” is a term to describe Chinese workers, which Edward Gay and his colleagues used occasionally in their correspondence. It is a term that can be found in news sources from the 19th century also, especially in those printed in Louisiana. In particular, the *Donaldsonville Chief*, a local Louisiana newspaper used the term rather frequently when reporting on incidents involving Chinese workers.

⁵⁶ William Gay to Edward Gay, March 20, 1871, Gay Papers, 67:722.

Ultimately it would take five days for the absentee workers to return to the St. Louis plantation. The men’s frustration was only trumped by their uncertainty about how best to deal with their labor problems, however. In fact, in a letter William Gay wrote his brother and warned that it would be unwise to punish their new workers by reducing their wages. He wrote, “I think it is best not to try to reduce their wages as they all seem so bitterly offended to a change of contract prices, but only to allow a man his time in proportion to the way he works.” The brothers, it appeared, were worried that any change to the agreed upon wage might result in their workers leaving altogether.

By July 1871, the experiment was over for both men. Though they had wanted desperately for the arrangement to work, perhaps they were not completely surprised when it did not. From the earliest stages of hiring Chinese workers, Edward Gay and his brother had been familiar with the risks. They were confronted with a myriad of reasons not to hire Chinese workers, yet the men continued in their efforts. This is significant, as it contradicts the assumption present in many scholarly works that planters thought Chinese workers would be the “cheap, durable, and easily exploited” labor sought to replace freedmen. Edward and William Gay knew that this was not to be the case. Why, then, did they insist on pursuing Chinese workers?⁵⁷

While a full answer to this question awaits further research, at this point it seems clear that Edward and William Gay wanted above all to move away from their reliance on the labor of freedmen, some of whom may have been their former slaves. The brothers’ efforts seem characteristic of the behavior and thinking of many Southern planters, who for years remained reeling from the shock of emancipation. Like most of their fellow sugar planters in Louisiana, and no doubt like cotton planters throughout the South, the Gays wanted to maintain the same levels of production as before the war – and they also wanted to keep their labor costs as low as possible. When Union troops secured the Louisiana sugar bowl, the Gays understood that their world had been turned upside down, and that would have to employ former slaves. Because of the peculiarities of sugar production, these ex-slaves became wage workers – and became powerful enough to express demands that the Gays did

⁵⁷ Matthew Guterl and Christine Skwiot, “Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire, and the Labor Problem” in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Radical History Review* Vol. 91: 40-61, 43.

not want to meet. Needless to say, race may have been a factor in the Gayses' decision to look for new workers. But this, too, awaits additional archival digging.

There also remains the question of precisely how the Gays came to settle on their putative solution to the myriad of problems presented to them by the freedmen. Though there is no direct reference to the "coolie" trade of the Caribbean in his records, Edward Gay's letters do refer to the rival Cuban sugar industry, and he was undoubtedly aware of the system of indentured servitude that was installed in the Caribbean after emancipation. Gay's decision to hire Chinese workers therefore was in all likelihood an effort to emulate the "coolie" system of the Caribbean. As the historian Rebecca J. Scott has framed it, the "(p)lanters and merchants in Havana and New Orleans, part of the same intertwined Atlantic world, kept a close eye on each other."⁵⁸

There is, in fact, strong evidence to suggest that planters throughout the South were aware of the "coolie trade," as they called it.⁵⁹ Debates about the "coolie" system raged in magazine such as Harper's, and the Southern agriculture magazine, De Bow's Review. Moreover, in July 1869, a Chinese Labor Convention was held in Memphis Tennessee, which attracted over five hundred delegates who had travelled from all across the South. A pamphlet entitled, "Remarks on the Chinese and Coolies," published and distributed in Louisiana in 1854 stands out as early proof that even in the 1850s, planters knew about and may have been attracted to "coolie" labor. Assuring readers of the allegedly passive and good-natured demeanor of the Chinese workers, and of the profitability of the trade, the pamphlet declared:

⁵⁸ Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 2.

Also helpful: Matthew Guterl, "I Went to the West Indies": Race, Place, and the Antebellum South," *American Literary History* (2006) 18.3: 446-467.

⁵⁹ Cohen, *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 47.

Wherever they have been employed, they have been found docile and easy to manage: their labor is preferable to that of the slave and free from that continental trouble which attends the employment of negro labor. One of the first experiences was made in a Sugar Estate in Mauritius in the year 1834. Four Chinese or Coolies were first employed, then eight, and the number gradually increased until the whole gang was finally composed of them. Almost all of the planters in the islands of Mauritius and Bourbon followed example and the strongest opponents of the system afterwards recognized its immense advantages and adopted it.⁶⁰

This excerpt, telling as it is, does not speak directly to what may well be the ultimate source of the Gayses' motives in hiring Chinese workers: namely, that planters saw them as the last, best hope for creating work conditions that resembled those of the antebellum period. Gay, like other planters, not only wanted to reduce labor costs; he also sought the authority of command. In my view, Gay must have understood that the only way to achieve both goals was to start anew with a different labor force.⁶¹

As we have seen, however, the results were a far cry from what Gay and other planters had envisioned. Even before engaging the 52 men from San Francisco, Gay knew that ultimately it would cost more to hire and retain them than to hire more freedmen, but he nonetheless was willing to pay more. Why? Over and above the question of race and whatever racial preferences Gay may have harbored, he evidently concluded that a contracted labor source reported to be "docile" and "obedient" would, *in the end*, prove less expensive because it would restore old order to an ostensibly New South.

⁶⁰ Bailly-Blanchard, Th., *Remarks on the Chinese and Coolies*, Pamphlet. New Orleans: Bailly-Blanchard, Th. & Co., 1854. The Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁶¹ There are many notable works that seek to examine the habits and worldviews of the planter class. These studies might be useful in allowing us to better understand Edward Gay's own understanding of the slave system and emancipation. Among the most helpful titles are: Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Master*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); ---, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

From the perspective of the 21st Century, the Gays failed venture signals more than what might seem a desperate, wrong-headed effort to transform the Southern labor force. For the effort did succeed in at least one regard: it effectively transformed at least part of the South into a real, if circumscribed, borderland. Louisiana thus became a “node” in a globalizing world.⁶² While much of the study of borderlands within American History has focused on the U.S.-Mexico border or the U.S.-Canada border, the field has begun to include regions independent of these bi-national borders as spaces, or “meeting places,” where “global history became local.”⁶³ Louisiana, I maintain, is one such region, as it became a destination for Chinese workers who had worked as indentured laborers in the Caribbean, for workers who had come from San Francisco, and for many more who came directly from China. These men and women arrived in Louisiana just as European indentured workers also arrived. For a short period, Louisiana thereby became a melting pot for these diverse migrant groups.⁶⁴

The circumstances in Louisiana were somewhat unique, however. Unlike many of the borderlands of North America situated along national boundaries, particularly in the

⁶² This definition comes from David Chang in his study of global migration and restrictive border-making of the 1800s. See: “Borderlands in a World at Sea: Concow Indians, Native Hawaiians, and South Chinese in Indigenous, Global, and National Spaces.” *Journal of American History* 98.2, 400, 384-404.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁶⁴ While the idea of borderlands is certainly a useful category of analysis, like all theories, this abstract category could benefit from further definition. Jerry Adelman and Stephen Aron perhaps most famously wrote about the ubiquity of the term “borderland” in their 1999 essay “From Borderlands to Border.” They ultimately argue for a more rigorous distinction between the terms “borderlands,” “bordered lands” and “frontier.” Philip J. Deloria’s “What is the Middle Ground, Anyway?” (2006) is an equally influential study of the tendency for scholars to conflate and interchange terms such as “middle ground,” “borderland” and “frontier,” which, he suggests, ultimately come to represent “a general metaphor, a kind of watered down idea about the mechanisms of compromise in all kinds of social and political situations,” despite Richard White’s concerted efforts to avoid this trap. Nonetheless, borderlands is a useful and relevant theory for the history of Louisiana. The results of the Chinese labor experiment, wherein thousands of Chinese men and women arrived and worked alongside European workers and freedmen, is a fascinating and unique time in Southern history. Louisiana would, in fact, be a tremendous case study for an empirical study of how borderlands work.

See: Jerry Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History,” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814-841; Deloria, Philip J., “What’s the Middle Ground, Anyway?” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 63, no. 1 (2006): 15-22, 15.

American South, the borderlands of Louisiana were organized around spaces of work. In their attempts to re-store order on their plantations, planters brought migrant groups from disparate regions into close contact with one another. Chinese laborers worked and lived alongside ex-freedmen, and European immigrants brought mainly from Germany, Ireland, Scandinavia, and the Southern shores of Italy.⁶⁵ Edward Gay himself would eventually hire 35 Scandinavian men to work on the St. Louis plantation in the fall of 1870, and these men, no doubt, worked in the same fields as his Chinese workers.⁶⁶

While Edward Gay left little detail about the organization of his plantation, or of the interaction between these diverse groups, clues about these intimate workspaces have emerged in the records of other Louisiana planters. There are descriptions of Sicilian farmhands working alongside ex-slaves and “intermingling freely,” and accounts of Chinese men working the same rows of sugar cane as Scandinavian workers.⁶⁷ Sugar planter William A. Shaffer described one such arrangement to the *Louisiana Sugar Bow* in June 1871. He told the newspaper of the twenty-five Chinese men in his employ who worked with ten freedmen “all in one gang.” There was no conflict, he explained to the reporter, but the two groups generally kept to themselves and lived in separate quarters situated on opposite ends of the plantation.⁶⁸ As the testimonial of Shaffer, and the records of other planters suggest,

⁶⁵ J. Carlyle Sitterson, “Importation of Chinese and European Laborers, 1869-1874,” in in *The Louisianan Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History 1: A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*, ed. Carl A. Brasseaux. Lafayette: University of Southwest Louisiana, 1996.

⁶⁶ L.L. Butler to Edward J. Gay, September 3, 1870, Gay Papers, 65:696.

Edward Gay worked with the Scandinavian Emigration Agency, located in Chicago, Illinois, to hire these workers. He agreed to pay “\$9 per head,” but as historian William Cohen has suggested, “(l)ittle is known of the fate of those workers, but they did not stay long.”

See: William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 116.

⁶⁷ Ethelyn Orso, “Sicilian Immigration into Louisiana,” in *The Louisianan Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History 1: A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*, ed. Carl A. Brasseaux. Lafayette: University of Southwest Louisiana, 1996.

⁶⁸ “The Chinese Labor Movement,” *The Louisiana Sugar Bowl*, June 8, 1871.

these sugar plantations became contact zones for workers of different cultures, different faiths and different languages. Southern Louisiana became a space between the Pacific and the Atlantic where groups of men and women from all reaches of the globe passed through, congregated, and undoubtedly interacted.

While the results of this cultural intermingling are beyond the scope of this essay, the aim is to call attention to Louisiana's place within the burgeoning literature on borderlands.

As historians Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett have suggested

As the field has grown and captured the attention of more and more historians, it has also become more cosmopolitan. What historians once saw as a distinct space beyond Anglo America—south of Georgia in the swamps of Spanish Florida, or beyond the Mississippi River in the deserts of northern Mexico—has burst at the seams, spilling out across the continent and beyond. Borderlands are now as likely to be British or African or Shoshone as Spanish; they are as likely to be found in Montreal or Missouri as in Chihuahua.⁶⁹

The field is indeed rapidly expanding. Borderlands have taken new and innovative forms in the works of historians, and though Louisiana has remained largely outside the parameters of this borderlands literature, its place within the field is evident.

Louisiana became a meeting space where different peoples and ethnic groups collided, coexisted and perhaps even redefined themselves.⁷⁰ What this space looked like, and how it operated at an empirical level demands further investigation, but, recognizing Louisiana's place within the borderlands literature might allow us the chance to see and narrate Louisiana's past in new ways.⁷¹ While the state's history has largely been written against a backdrop of racial polarity, of contestation between white southern planters and

⁶⁹ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," in *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011): 338-361, 340.

⁷⁰ Hämäläinen and Johnson, eds., *Major Problems*, 1.

⁷¹ This is an idea drawn from Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett's discussion of the usefulness of borderlands studies. They write, "What are the borderlands history? Who are its subjects, what are its limits, and can it demarcate America differently? Will borderlands history simply reinforce mainstream histories or might it help us see and narrate the past in new ways?"

Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands", 338.

black ex-slaves, the story of the Chinese labor experiment illuminates a more complex world system that developed in the wake of the Civil War.

Part Four—Edward Gay and the Historiography of the Chinese Labor Experiment: Towards a new Direction

The history of Edward Gay's efforts to bring Chinese workers to his sugar fields, and the history of Louisiana to which Gay's personal story points, joins a growing body of literature that situates such efforts in a global framework. As the records of Edward Gay have shown, there is indeed reason to acknowledge the very global nature of the Chinese labor trade. Not surprisingly, the connection between the plantations of Iberville Parish and those of Havana, Cuba, has been the subject of many of the field's most important works, most notably Lucy Cohen's *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, a study whose 1984 treatment of the intersection of Louisiana, Southern, Caribbean and Chinese history remains palpable in the field's most recent works.⁷² And there is, no doubt, great value in incorporating the story of Edward Gay and planters like him into the larger global context of indentured labor, race relations, emancipation and empire.⁷³ In the headlong rush towards transnationalism, however, the field has overlooked some important questions about how the

⁷² Lucy Cohen is, in fact, to be credited for initiating this turn towards a more global framework in her work *The Chinese in the Post-Civil War South* (1984). The work is the first to move beyond a regional study of the Chinese brought into Louisiana and the greater South, ultimately suggesting that Southern planters likely took their cue from the "coolie" system installed in the Caribbean after emancipation. This was a great departure from the field's earliest works by sociologists James Loewen and Robert Seto Quan, whose works were interested in on how the Chinese of the Mississippi Delta, integrated, and perhaps even assimilated, into Southern society. Cohen built upon these early studies and expanded the scope of the essay, moving beyond a regional study and examining the global connections of the Chinese labor movement in the U.S. South. This global framework is present in the field's most recent work, *Coolies and Cane* by Moon-ho Jung, whose work examines how the notion and definition of "coolie" was made and remade at the local, national and transnational level.

⁷³ For more about Southern history's place among the literature of world history, see: Matthew Guterl and Christine Skwiot, "Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire, and "the Labor Problem" in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Radical History Review* 91 (2005): 40-61.

Chinese labor experiment by Southern planters much like Edward Gay might allow historians to reconsider the history of Louisiana and of the American South.⁷⁴

The 52 Chinese workers who came to work on Gay's plantations and the thousands of others who arrived in the greater South did not live in a hermetically sealed community, yet the majority of studies on the Chinese in the post-bellum South have treated the labor experiment as an aberration that had no perceivable effect on Southern society. Yet, in the case of Edward Gay, Chinese workers represented more than just a new form of labor. They represented a rejection of the employer-employee relationship between planters and freedmen, and a last-ditch effort by Gay to restore an authority of command resembling that which he had assumed under slavery, further complicating the story of wage labor in Louisiana's sugar bowl. Moreover, the story of Chinese workers on Edward Gay's plantation points to a new way that historians might view and understand Louisiana as a space. Though the Gays hoped that an "immobile" and "docile" work force would restore a sense of order on their plantations and within Louisiana more generally, their efforts worked to make chaotic circumstances in Louisiana more chaotic. Workers came from across the globe, and for a brief period, Louisiana met the definition of a borderlands region.

My work on these matters is, of course, just small step toward understanding how the story of Chinese workers in the post-bellum South might revise the way we understand the history of Louisiana, and the narrative of Reconstruction, in particular. There is still much to

Loewen's *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (1981) explored where Chinese migrants fit into a society so strictly divided by the color line of black and white, while Robert Seto Quan's *Lotus Among Magnolia: The Mississippi Chinese* (1983) examined the progress made by the progeny of these initial settlers in the Mississippi Delta. Most recently, Moon-ho Jung's, *Coolies and Cane* has embraced Cohen's global framework. In this work, Jung seeks to understand how the "coolie trade" and the importation of Chinese laborers into the U.S. South effected formations of race and nation in nineteenth century America. Like Cohen, Jung moves beyond a regional study, examining how the definition of "coolie" was made and remade at the local, national and transnational level.

be learned. The need to understand the significance of the Chinese labor experiment is especially pertinent when we consult the literature on the Caribbean's "coolie" trade. Though a small body of literature, the historiography of the Chinese in the Caribbean distinguishes itself from the literature of the Chinese in the post-bellum South by moving past simply telling the story of the "coolie" trade and asking further how the arrival of Chinese men and women changed or influenced the narrative of Caribbean history.⁷⁵

Lisa Yun's *The Coolie Speaks* (2008) is perhaps the best example of this scholarship, and historians of the American South could draw from the two central questions that frame her work.⁷⁶ The first: "How are the concepts of slavery and freedom—the bases of American and Western exceptionalist arguments—challenged by the histories of Asian diasporas in the Americas?" The second: "How do transnational narratives of the first Asians brought to this hemisphere (in the eighteenth and nineteenth century) contribute to and revise the legacies of North and South American history and literature?"⁷⁷ Yun's work is an impressive example of how the history of Chinese workers in the Caribbean can challenge fundamental understandings about the history of emancipation in Cuba.

⁷⁵ Many of the field's most notable works seek to answer this question. Particularly helpful titles are: Juan Jimenez Pastrana, "Los chinos en la historia de Cuba, 1847-1930." Havana: Ed. *Ciencias Sociales* (1983) 13-17; Juan Perez de la Riva, "La situación legal del cull en Cuba," in *El Barracón. Esclavitud y capitalismo en Cuba*. Barcelona: Ed. Critica (1978) 111-140; Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985); Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008)

Note: For an insightful and thorough review of the historiography of the "coolie trade" in the Caribbean, see Evelyn Hu-DeHart's "Chinese Coolie Labour in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labour or Neo-slavery?" *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (1993): 67-86.

⁷⁶ As the title suggests, Yun's approach is a unique and commendable effort to bring forth the voice of the Chinese men and women who worked and lived as indentured laborers in the Caribbean. She accesses these voices by reviewing the 1876 Cuba Commission Report, a compendium of 2,841 individual written and oral testimonies collected by delegates sent to Cuba by the Qing government to investigate allegations of cruelty against indentured workers. More importantly, she also seeks to understand how these new voices challenge existing narratives.

⁷⁷ Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008),

In particular, Yun examines the role of the contract in the “coolie” trade, and ultimately argues that the beginning of the contract system in Cuba did not signify an important step toward emancipation. Reviewing worker testimonials, she unyokes the association between labor contracts and freedom, suggesting that the contract did little more than to obscure the distinction between freedom and slavery, challenging a popular understanding of emancipation within the literature of Cuban history.

Of course, circumstances in the sugar-rich nation of Cuba were different than those of the sugar-producing regions of the Southern U.S. in the 19th century. Whether or not Chinese workers fundamentally challenged the idea of freedom or emancipation in the post-civil war South is still unknown, but it is a question worth taking up. Nevertheless Yun’s work and the historiography of the “coolie” trade in the Caribbean more generally provide workable models for historians wishing to write the Chinese population of the post-Civil War South back into American history. We should ask how the narrative of Chinese workers in the South might revise the legacy of American history and literature.⁷⁸

In posing these questions, historians can transform the role of thousands of Chinese migrants who arrived in the South as the behest of planters like Edward Gay from the occasional subjects of innocuous sentences, to which they have been relegated in many the canonical works of Southern history, to actors in the narrative of the American South. We must, I think, acknowledge the Chinese men and women who entered the Reconstructed South and work to “unsilence” this neglected chapter in Louisiana’s past. Once these Chinese men and women are written back into the history of Louisiana and the Reconstructed South, it might then prove fruitful to ask: why have they been left out?

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, xx.

Coda

Focusing on a small window in Louisiana's history, the essay has interrogated a temporary, but telling labor experiment in the years following the Civil War. Covering this specific period in Louisiana's past, the scope of the essay is, therefore, rather narrow. It begins with the Union (re-)occupation of Louisiana, explores the roots of the sugar region's unique wage labor system, and concludes in 1871, as the last of the Chinese workers on Edward Gay's St. Louis plantation left in search of more desirable work. In reviewing this period, the essay ultimately suggests that the actions of Gay and his fellow planters inadvertently worked to transform Louisiana into a borderland. But it also suggests that Louisiana was left in this state of limbo indefinitely, which it was not.

In fact, a state of chaos came crashing down just a few years after the failure of the labor experiment. The disappointing outcome with Chinese and other foreign workers for Edward Gay and his fellow planters proved to Louisiana's sugar barons that they would be unable to bypass employing freedmen in the sugar cultivation process. Far from giving up, however, these planters simply sought new ways to restore the authority of command they so desired. It is therefore important to note that while the summer of 1871 may have marked the end of Edward Gay's trial with Chinese workers, his failure and that of his fellow planters simply ushered in a new era in Louisiana's sugar bowl -- one in which planters much like Gay were finally able to restore order on their plantations and, not coincidentally, in the state house.

These efforts culminated in the 1887 Thibodaux Massacre, a confrontation between planters and sugar workers that signaled to both planters and freedmen that the ways of the "New South" were over. The massacre followed a three-week standoff between sugar

planters and workers that had halted production in most of the sugar bowl. Strikers demanded higher wages and a reformatted system of payment, and planters rejected both requests.⁷⁹ The strike deadline of November 1st passed without a resolution, and thousands of strikers gathered in the town of Thibodaux. There, an ad hoc militia of three hundred men, many from the powerful planters class, assembled to meet them. Finally, in the early hours of November 23, 1887, shots rang out.

The result was a certain victory for sugar planters. Though the exact death toll is unclear, it is widely held that between thirty to three hundred freedmen were killed in the massacre.⁸⁰ Surviving freedmen returned to plantations, demoralized, and production in the sugar bowl resumed by late-November. More importantly for Gay and his fellow planters, the region would not witness another demonstration of collective action by workers until the mid-twentieth century.⁸¹ After twenty-five years, sugar planters had finally regained control of their plantations, though it had been a long and bloodied road.

Indeed, the years leading to Thibodaux were speckled with violence. Much of it was precipitated by the paramilitary group, the White League, whose founding in the spring of 1874 coincided with two major events in Louisiana's history, the Coushatta Massacre of August 1874 and the Battle of Liberty Place in September of the same year. The group was responsible also for a violent campaign of bulldozing and intimidation at the voting booths, which reached new heights between 1874-1876. Though their efforts did not deter the

⁷⁹ Specifically, workers demanded planters raise wages from ninety cents a day to one dollar a day plus rations, and sixty cents plus rations for night shifts. They also demanded bi-weekly payments and that these wages be paid in currency rather than scrip.

⁸⁰ The historian Rebecca J. Scott verifies the still uncertain death toll in her book, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Emancipation*. She writes, "No credible official count of the victims of the Thibodaux massacre was ever made; bodies continued to turn up in shallow graves outside town for weeks to come" (85). See: Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁸¹ Rodrigue, 190.

election of Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes over Democratic opponent Samuel J. Tilden in the 1876 presidential race, the Compromise of 1877 saw Union troops leave Louisiana after more than a decade in the state, and Democrat Francis T. Nicholls claim the governor's seat in the gubernatorial contest in Louisiana. The Democrats took back the state house, and just ten years later at Thibodaux, they would take back the fields for the last time.

Though the Thibodaux dispute ostensibly arose over the question of wages, it was in fact about the issue of control – in the world of labor and sugar production, and in the world of politics. Edward Gay, like other planters, had a large stake in both. While it is unclear whether Gay was involved in the Thibodaux massacre, or the violence in the years preceding the event, given his concern over the profitability of the sugar industry, it is likely that he was sympathetic to the re-instatement of Democratic rule, and it is even more probable that he was in favor of collective action by planters.⁸²

Gay, for his part, found other avenues to re-assert the authority of the planter class. He founded the Louisiana Sugar Planters Association in 1874, an organization that wielded considerable influence in state and national politics, agricultural science and technology, and even education.⁸³ He also became a member of the 49th Congress, not insignificantly

⁸² It should be noted that John C. Rodrigue has suggested that the state's elite planters such as Edward Gay's would have been of a divided mind on the matter of bulldozing, and the taking back of state politics through force. He suggests that while planters would have been happy to see planters regaining control over their workers, they also worried about a "demoralized" workforce. He writes, "Concern for their personal financial affairs caused some planters to condemn the White League's methods, which threatened to upset the delicate equilibrium of the plantations and demoralize workers." (167).

⁸³ In arguably the most thorough study of the LSPA to date, historian John Heitmann accurately outlines the association's goals and achievements, writing:

Established in 1877, the LSPA systematically developed connections with federal government officials, practical engineers and academic scientists to gain its organizational objectives. This group: (1) wielded the political power necessary for the continuance of protective tariff legislation; (2) persuaded the U. S. Department of Agriculture to investigate cultivation and manufacturing problems; (3) gained control of the marketing mechanisms in Louisiana by creating the Louisiana Sugar Exchange in 1884; (4) founded a private sugar experiment station in 1885; (5) published a weekly trade newspaper in 1888, *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer*, which informed its

beating out the last remaining Republican in Louisiana, William Pitt Kellogg, for the seat. Though Gay may not have been present at the Thibodaux massacre, he was a U.S. congressman and president of the most powerful agricultural organizations in the state when the first shots rang out at Thibodaux. And, he was no doubt pleased by the outcome and what it meant for the state's sugar planters. Gay and his fellow planters were finally able to restore the authority of command on their plantations they had envisioned since the arrival of Union troops in 1862. It was the same vision that drove Edward Gay and planters throughout the South to import Chinese workers, and the same one that propelled the violence at one of the bloodiest massacres in Louisiana's history.

constituency of the political and technological objectives; and (6) established the Audubon Sugar School in 1891.

See: John A. Heitmann, "Organization as Power: The Louisiana Sugar Planters' Association and the Creation of Scientific and Technical Institutions, 1877-1910," *The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 27, no. 3 (1986): 282, 281-294.

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