

Cof-fle

“Cof-fle: A Line of Animals or Slaves Fastened or Driven Along Together”

“Imagine you were taking a trip from Richmond, VA to Atlanta, GA. Except the year is 1828; the Southern railways (which would be built mostly by slaves) was just beginning construction. There were no cars. The boats which might go around Florida to get to New Orleans had no inland stops. Steamboats were going up and down the Mississippi river but there were no connecting waterways. Also, imagine you were a slave.

You didn't ride in wagons or stagecoaches. You walked, approximately 600 miles, with ill-fitting shoes or none at all. To prevent you from escaping, there was an iron collar around your neck with a padlock to keep you from removing it. The collar was connecting you to a bar with another collar on the other end. That collar was around another slave's neck making you a pair. Chains connected the pairs so that none could run away.

There's no shame in being unfamiliar with the term coffle, although it was once in common use. They typically started in areas with an abundance of slaves like Virginia or Maryland. Agents would go from farm to farm, asking if the owners had slaves they wanted to sell. Slaves would be gathered at slave pens, jails where they would await the collection of enough slaves to make the trip worthwhile. A coffle

might contain as many as 300 slaves, kept in line by men with whips and guns on horseback... and dogs.

The coffle would march as much as 20–25 miles a day, the trip would take approximately three months. The coffle consisted mostly of young men and women between 17–25 years old, hardy enough to make the trip. Slave women were hardy enough to do all manner of slave work but were also breeders, worth more than their male counterparts. There were also children; babies carried by their mothers or older children who walked on their own.

One company, Franklin & Armfield, applied modern business practices to slave trading. They had multiple slave-depots (jails) along their various routes. If you pictured these jails as regional warehouses from which they shipped their goods across the South; you'd be on the right track, They utilized all manner of transportation, although the unlucky slaves headed to Atlanta, walked the whole way. Coffles followed the Cumberland Road to Wheeling, VA (now West Virginia) and the Ohio River where they boarded steamboats. On other routes, they might reach a train station and be packed in cars until they reached their destination. After Isaac Franklin and John Armfield got rich dealing in human misery, they retired and became socially prominent members of their prospective societies.

Slaves generally weren't allowed to talk during their forced march. They were often allowed, even encouraged to sing. One such song

was discovered by the black abolitionist William W. Brown and published in 1848.

SONG OF THE COFFLE GANG

This song is said to be sung by Slaves, as they are chained in gangs when parting from friends for the far off South — children taken from parents, husbands from wives, and brothers from sisters.

See these poor souls from Africa,

Transported to America:

We are stolen, and sold to Georgia, will you go along with me?

We are stolen and sold to Georgia, go sound the jubilee.

See wives and husbands sold apart,

The children's screams! — it breaks my heart;

There's a better day coming, will you go along with me?

There's a better day coming, go sound the jubilee.

O, gracious Lord! when shall it be,

That we poor souls shall all be free?

Lord, break them Slavery powers — will you go along with me?

Lord, break them Slavery powers, go sound the jubilee.

Dear Lord! dear Lord! when Slavery'll cease,

Then we poor souls can have our peace;

There's a better day coming, will you go along with me?

There's a better day coming, go sound the jubilee.

So much American history is missing. Lost would not be the correct word as its disappearance was quite intentional. History books don't tell of the regular marches of slaves across the South and to the West. Fortunes made, women raped, children abused. We have some idea of how many slaves died crossing the Atlantic during the Middle

Passage. No such statistics tell of the slaves died and or killed while undergoing a dangerous trek. Slaves were the exact same thing as money and coffles were apt to be robbed. Bullets flying in every direction. If you've never heard of the word "coffle?" The appropriate question to ask would be, why?"

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