

## Scene on Radio

### The Cotton Empire (Season 4, Episode 3): Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e3-the-cotton-empire/>

**John Biewen:** Chenj, I'm still thinking about that thing we heard from Woody Holton, the historian, near the end of the last episode.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Oh, yeah.

**John Biewen:** The thing he said about there being a tension between democracy, on one hand, and, on the other, capital investment. Economic growth. Well, at least in the minds of some important people.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, man. That stuck with me. I mean, it's like, more democracy hurts economic growth. Because he wasn't talking about Mussolini, either. Woody was talking about the framers of the Constitution, in 1787, that they thought that that tension was real.

**John Biewen:** Let's just play the tape again. Here's Woody Holton of the University of South Carolina – he's a leading scholar of the American Revolutionary period.

**Woody Holton:** The authors of the Constitution believed that in order to make America safe for investment, they had to make America less democratic. They really believed that there's a continuum or spectrum between, if you move the needle towards more democracy, you're gonna get less investment of capital, and if you move it towards less democracy, you're going to get more investment capital.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Mmm. I mean that's so different from the mainstream thinking that at least I've heard about progress, right? Like usually folks tie those two things together, the free market and democracy. Like peanut butter and jelly, or something like that. But the idea is that Americans are free economically, our markets are free, and that's the key to our democracy and the greatness of the United States.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, I think that is more or less how we tend to think about it in the mainstream of our culture. So what does it mean that people like Alexander Hamilton and James Madison thought you had to rein in democracy, at least somewhat, kind of keep the will of the majority in

check, in order to keep the country safe for capitalism? When the framers were writing the Constitution, it was the early days of the Industrial Revolution, really moreso in Europe than in the U.S., but it was happening. So I can imagine that to them, capital investment meant progress.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, and I think this is actually really important. You know, sometimes I'll be in political discussions with friends, who might be praising our democracy more than I would. And I feel like sometimes when you point out things like Shays' Rebellion, or labor struggles, or other ways that economic interests limited democracy, they just kind of look at me with this, um, like, a silence. And in that silence I feel like there's this quiet but actually kind of stubborn belief in this idea that, Yeah, Chenj, we might do some bad things here and there, but if by doing that we create a safe environment for investment and we're gonna get economic growth, that's gonna create all these other kind of benefits and actually a sort of freedom.

**John Biewen:** Come on, Chenjerai. Are you out here suggesting that a rising tide does not lift all boats?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** (Laughs.) No, I mean I think it does. Unless you need the boats to deal with industrial-produced sea level rise. Right? But I do think it's important to take that claim seriously about economics and progress. But if you really want to investigate it, then you gotta ask, like, how did that work out? I mean, really go back to that period in the early part of the 1800s, what does that really tell us about American priorities? Did we move more toward democracy? And ultimately, all that wealth creation, what did it create for most people?

[MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** I'm John Biewen. That was Chenjerai Kumanyika, Rutgers University media scholar, activist, artist, podcaster. He's helping me make sense of things during this series and he'll be back later in the episode. From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Season 4 of *Scene on Radio*. We're calling the series, *The Land that Never Has Been Yet* – that's a line from a Langston Hughes poem, by the way. An internet search will tell you the rest. This season we're kind of retelling the story of the United States, pivotal parts of it, anyway, as we try to make sense of "democracy" in America. How did we get here, and, really, where

are we? Just how democratic is this country, or not, and how democratic was it ever meant to be?

This time out, “The Cotton Empire.” But we’re gonna start by dipping back into the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Last episode we looked at the making of the U.S. Constitution, but we didn’t get into the debates over slavery that summer in Philadelphia. The framers managed to write the document without using the word, but behind those closed doors, slavery was almost a constant subtext. And, as revealed in James Madison’s notes from the convention, slavery was often openly on the table.

**James Madison’s Notes [voiceover]:** Mr. Wilson did not well see on what principle the admission of blacks in the proportion of three-fifths could be explained....

**Gen. Pinckney [voiceover]:** ...and that property in slaves should not be exposed to danger under a government instituted for the protection of property.

**John Biewen:** About four in ten of the framers were slaveholders. A few of the other men at the convention made passionate statements against the institution. Here's Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania railing against the three-fifths clause, because it gave the slave states inflated representation in Congress.

**Gouverneur Morris [voiceover]:** ...the inhabitant of Georgia and South Carolina who goes to the coast of Africa and, in defiance of the most sacred laws of humanity, tears away his fellow creatures from their dearest connections and damns them to the most cruel bondages shall have more votes in a government instituted for protection of the rights of mankind than the citizen of Pennsylvania or New Jersey, who views with a laudable horror so nefarious a practice.

**John Biewen:** In fact, everybody knew going in that the slave states would never sign a Constitution that didn't keep them in the slavery business. And the document very much did. And yet, historians say, a lot of people at the time, even some slaveholders, thought slavery would fade away, say, within a few decades. Several men voiced that opinion at the convention.

**James Madison [voiceover]:** Mr. Sherman...observed that the abolition of slavery seemed to be going on in the United States and that the good sense of the several states would probably by degrees complete it.

**Oliver Ellsworth [voiceover]:** As population increases, poor laborers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless. Slavery in time will not be a speck in our country.

**[MUSIC]**

**John Biewen:** Slavery, less than “a speck in our country.” That prediction, by Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut, could not have been more wrong. The slaveholding delegate from South Carolina, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, was more prescient. He basically said to his fellow framers: Gentlemen, let’s get real. Far from letting it fade away, we should have *more* slavery. That, as he put it, would be in “the interest of the whole Union.”

**Charles Cotesworth Pinckney [voiceover]:** The more slaves, the more produce to employ the carrying trade; the more consumption also, and the more of this, the more of revenue for the common treasury.

**John Biewen:** But even Pinckney, in his greediest dreams, could not have imagined what was really gonna happen with America's slave-based economy in the coming decades.

**Robin Alario:** So, do you want to talk about pre-industrial life at all...?

**John Biewen:** Well, I tell you what. Yeah, let's, um....

**John Biewen:** Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Today it's a suburb, just a few miles up the Seekonk River from Providence.

**Robin Alario:** Paw tuk, I guess, is a Native American, Narragansett word, which means place where the water falls. So we have falling water....



**John Biewen:** Robin Alario is an interpreter with the Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket. The site's several buildings, including the main mill in yellow clapboard, stand alongside the Blackstone River in the heart of town. Before Samuel Slater showed up 1790 to bring this mill to life, Pawtucket was another pre-industrial New England town.

**Robin Alario:** We had a shipbuilding industry, we had ironworks industry, and we had a rum brewing economy. Everyone else was pretty much a farmer.

**John Biewen:** But Slater did arrive. And because he did, Pawtucket can call itself:

**Robin Alario:** The birthplace of the Industrial Revolution...

**John Biewen:** Well, the Industrial Revolution in the U.S.

**Robin Alario:** Because this is the first successful water-powered cotton spinning wheel here in the United States. There were others....

**John Biewen:** Sam Slater had worked as an apprentice in an English textile factory, and he brought with him a pioneering English design for a cotton spinning machine.

**Robin Alario:** We head into the textile mill....

**John Biewen:** He stole the technology, which got him called “Slater the Traitor” in England.

**Robin Alario:** So we have a wooden replica of one of the first cotton spinning machines, known as the Arkwright water frame. This is the whole reason we're here.

**John Biewen:** The machine is made of wood, with some metal parts and gears. It pulls cleaned cotton fiber off one spool, spins it into a thread and winds it onto another spool below.

**Robin Alario:** The water power would turn the gears, and the rollers would twist the cotton and it would get wound around the bobbin.

**John Biewen:** Samuel Slater was recruited to bring this technology to Rhode Island by Moses Brown, the rich Providence businessman and financier. Brown was looking to industrialize cotton milling using river power. Slater's machine made that happen.

**Robin Alario:** But of course we can't talk about a cotton mill without the cotton.

**[Music]**

**John Biewen:** No, we can't. Much more on the cotton, and the people who produced it, in a minute. But we also can't talk about the transformation of the cotton economy without mentioning that other big invention – one that more of us did hear about in school.

**Robin Alario:** I can demonstrate this.

**[Sound: She hand-cranks cotton gin]**

**John Biewen:** The cotton gin, which mechanized the process of pulling seeds out of cotton bolls. Before the machine, that was a slow, painstaking job that enslaved people did by hand on southern plantations. The gin dramatically multiplied the amount of raw cotton that slave labor camps could produce. Eli Whitney patented the first cotton gin in 1793.

**Robin Alario:** That same year he filed his patent was the same year this mill opened for business. Samuel Slater became very successful with that cotton mill and everybody realized this was the new big thing. So they wanted their own cotton mills. This whole park was filled with cotton mills...

**John Biewen:** Cotton mills sprouted across New England, including dozens in Massachusetts alone.

**Robin Alario:** And then they needed more cotton gins because that just was so easy to meet all that demand. But that meant they needed more slaves to work the cotton gins on the cotton plantations. And so our northern mills helped perpetuate slavery and make it last until the end of the Civil War.

## [MUSIC]

**John Biewen:** No one saw this coming just a few years before, when people were predicting the demise of slavery in the U.S.: this technological revolution in cotton processing. It uncorked the economic potential of an industry, and of this new nation.

**Edward Baptist:** Slavery, especially cotton slavery, and the expansion of cotton slavery, drove that sort of post-colonial economy from being something of a backwater to being one of the most, and, by the end of the 19th century, the absolutely most important economy—something that is, at that point, new in world history: a global capitalist economy, a global capitalist industrial economy. And slavery in the U.S. south is central to all of that.

**John Biewen:** Edward Baptist, professor of History at Cornell and author of the book, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. In that book, Baptist tells the story of the decades-long rush to make more and more money by producing more cotton.

Entrepreneurs rushed in, bringing money from investors in the north, and in Europe, especially England. But the original thirteen states really included only two states in prime cotton-growing territory: South Carolina and Georgia. Suddenly, the hunger to make cotton money creates a powerful push to expand southwest – into what would become Alabama, then Mississippi, and eventually on to Texas.

**John Biewen:** Remind us of the steps that are needed. First of all, you've got to take the land.

**Ed Baptist:** Yep. First of all, you have to take the land, and....

**John Biewen:** That meant, for one thing, jostling and making deals with European empires that still held claims to the land, Spain and France. And:

**Ed Baptist:** And above all, you have the Native peoples themselves.

**John Biewen:** The Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole peoples, living on their lands across what is now the southeastern United States.

**Ed Baptist:** The U.S. gradually defeats and pushes out all of them in a series of wars and, uh, forced treaties, let's say.

[Music]

**John Biewen:** Each episode in the process of “removing” Indigenous people played out in its own way over several decades, but Baptist says there was a repeating pattern. The tribes would sign a treaty with the state or federal government, agreeing to a boundary. The tribe would say: We’ll give up the land on that side of the line, so long as you allow no white settlement over here, on our side. Deal, the state or federal government would say. But then....

**Ed Baptist:** White settlers move into the Native land despite the boundary that's there. Conflicts occur. State militia and local forces will first fight against the Native people, but also the politicians, the white politicians from those states and territories will put pressure on the national government to intervene. Which in all but a few cases the national government was eager to do. The one exception is John

Quincy Adams in the 1820s, who actually believes that the federal government should honor its treaties, and should force Georgia to honor its treaties with the Cherokee and the Creek and other groups. And this is a big part of why he's not re-elected in 1828.

**John Biewen:** Adams, the only president in early U.S. history who argues strongly for honoring treaties with Native tribes, loses the presidency to Andrew Jackson, a man Native Americans would call “Indian killer.” More on Jackson later. So, through broken treaties and lots of violence, the United States pushes Native people aside in the Deep South.

**Ed Baptist:** That's ultimately a process of conquest, but also a process of empire.

**[MUSIC]**

**John Biewen:** Empire. Meaning, expansion for the purpose of building more wealth. This idea takes on a religious flavor with the term “manifest destiny,” coined in the 1840s: It's God's will that so-called white people seize, and spread across, this continent. With new lands secured in what is



now the southeastern United States, what happens next, in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had never happened anywhere else in the world, says Baptist.

**Ed Baptist:** You have the transformation of a subcontinental-sized area from woods and subsistence production by Native peoples into a massive commercial agricultural complex.

**[Music]**

**John Biewen:** That transformation requires not just land, but labor, too.

**John Biewen:** Uh, I think this was a new word to me, I confess. The word coffle.

**Ed Baptist:** Yeah. Coffle is a term used to describe a chained group of enslaved people who are being marched from where they've been bought to where they're gonna be sold, or re-sold.

**John Biewen:** Ed describes a scene repeated thousands of times from the beginning of the 1800s up to the Civil War. Scenes from America's domestic slave trade – people sold in the older, mid-Atlantic slave states, to traders and speculators transporting those black people to the new cotton states.

**Ed Baptist:** They would be moved in groups of thirty, fifty, in some cases as many as two hundred at a time, guarded by a few whites on horseback. They'd be handcuffed together in pairs at the wrist. And there'd also typically be one long chain that passed through the rings on [an] iron collar that everybody was wearing.

**John Biewen:** An iron collar around the neck.

**Ed Baptist:** Around the neck, yeah. Yeah.

**John Biewen:** These journeys would typically take weeks, the enslaved people locked in the coffle the entire time, day and night.

**Ed Baptist:** People would be marched as far as from Virginia to New Orleans or Natchez.

**John Biewen:** Ed says enslavers and traders moved about a million people in this way, to those Deep South slave markets, over decades. By the 1850s, enslaved people have cut down vast forest lands, and two million are toiling in the fields across, now, eight cotton states, from South Carolina, Tennessee and Florida, to Louisiana and Texas. By this time, through the Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican-American War, the U.S. has conquered and claimed much more land, all the way to California. And American cotton is clothing much of the world.

**Ed Baptist:** Those states by the 1850s are producing something like eighty-eight to ninety-five percent, depends on the year, of the cotton that is sold in Liverpool, which is the world's biggest cotton market.

**John Biewen, whispers:** Wow.

**John Biewen:** And cotton was the most important, most widely traded commodity in the world at that time, says Baptist. As central to the global economy as oil is today.

**Ed Baptist:** So it's almost as if those states are, to draw the oil metaphor out a little further, those states are the equivalent of Saudi Arabia plus Venezuela, plus Nigeria, plus Kuwait, plus Iraq, plus Iran, plus the UAE. And Russia (laughs). All within one larger political entity, the United States.

**[BREAK]**

**John Biewen:** The standard American story ties together the nation's capitalist successes *and* democracy, linking the two as inseparable forms of freedom. Together, the secret to America's greatness. But whose freedom? In fact, the U.S. built its economic might, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on stolen land and captive, exploited labor. And, on something else.

**Kidada Williams:** Violence is part of the system that is America. It's part of the DNA. It's not a bug. You know, it is a main feature of this thing that, in terms of the *building* of America.

My name is Kidada Williams. I'm associate professor of history at Wayne State University in Detroit.

**John Biewen:** Kidada Williams wrote the book, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, about racial violence against African Americans in the 19th century. She takes on the accusation, made to this day, that enslaved black people were passive and compliant. Think about it. If that were true, the traders transporting all those enslaved men wouldn't have had to chain them together in a coffer. And the growing South wouldn't have needed to go full totalitarian, with slave patrols and regular use of the lash. That's what it took, Kidada says, because enslaved black people were *not* passive.

**Kidada Williams:** What people do is what people have done across all time, is fight back. They resist.

**John Biewen:** They try to escape, they attack, they organize revolts. Again and again, year after year.

**Kidada Williams:** And so, in order to coerce that labor out of them, in order to try to, you know, scare them, intimidate them away from fighting back, you have to use more and more violence, and you have to use violence on a daily basis.

[**Sound, *12 Years a Slave*:** People in cotton field humming a gospel song.]

**John Biewen:** This is a scene from the 2013 movie, “12 Years a Slave,” based on the memoir by Solomon Northup, published in 1853.

**Overseer:** Pick that cotton! Move along now! (Crack of whip)

**John Biewen:** The accounts by Northup and other enslaved people, as well as records kept by enslavers, tell another story about the role of violence in the cotton economy.

**Ed Baptist:** Cotton picking was the point in the production cycle that was the bottleneck. Right? It was the slowest, most difficult part of the production process.

**John Biewen:** Historian Ed Baptist combed over thousands of accounting books kept by cotton planters, showing the daily picking records of their captive workers. What he found astonished him: The rapidly improving productivity of those workers, decade by decade.

**Ed Baptist:** If you compare the amount picked by the average cotton picker in 1800 to the average in 1860, you've got something like a four- to eight-fold increase. So that's an enormous increase in efficiency, if you will.

**[Music]**

**John Biewen:** Ed says some of that change may be explained by improved selection of cotton seeds, which led to fatter bolls over time. But he thinks most of the increase was brought about by the people doing the picking, through nothing but their faster-moving hands – their growing skill

and urgency. To illustrate how and why this happened, Ed highlights an account by a man named Henry Clay, who endured slavery, and later told of a brutal device.

**Ed Baptist:** And he claimed that after he was sold in the domestic slave trade, moved from North Carolina, where he was born, to Louisiana, he was owned by a man who had a whipping machine. I guess the overseer wasn't whipping efficiently enough. So when the enslaver decided that somebody like Henry Clay had to be whipped, he'd be brought in, tied on to this machine. And then the enslaver could simply crank a handle and a big wheel would spin around, and there were a bunch of whips attached to the wheel, which would then whip his back. And this may very well have been a true thing, but I think he was also using it as a metaphor to talk about the ways in which, increasingly, in the 1800s, enslavers measured how much enslaved people were picking...

**12 Years a Slave, Overseer:** Two hundred and forty for Bob.

**Owner (Michael Fassbender):** What you got for James?

**Overseer:** 295 pounds.



**Owner:** That's real good, boy!

**Ed Baptist:** ...compared that to targets that they had assigned to individuals, or to the group as a whole, and whipped those who didn't make the picking quota.

**12 Years a Slave, Overseer:** 206 pounds for George.

**Owner:** How much he pick yesterday?

**Overseer:** 229.

**Owner:** Get him out.

**Overseer:** Come on, get. Come on, boy, move!

**John Biewen:** To avoid these routine whippings, workers on slave labor camps picked faster, and faster.

**Overseer:** Five hundred and twelve pounds for Patsey.

**Owner:** Five hundred and twelve! Queen of the field, she is.

**John Biewen:** It's impossible to count the toll in human suffering.

**12 Years a Slave:** (Cracks of whips in distance, agonized shouts by a man and woman as they're whipped)

**John Biewen:** It's easier to quantify white America's expanding wealth and economic might. Add up the changes: The vast expansion of cotton acreage and of the enslaved population working the fields; those captive human beings picking the crop faster and faster, driven by torture and the threat of torture; and a similar spike in productivity on the processing end, thanks to the cotton gin and the spinning machines in northern mills. From 1800 to 1860, Ed Baptist says, cotton production in the U.S. multiplies five hundred fold, from four million pounds a year to two billion. The labor of enslaved black people makes it all possible. And even if white America is entirely ungrateful and always will be, the *market* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century does grasp the value of enslaved workers.

**12 Years a Slave, violin music, slave dealer:** So, inspect at your leisure. Take your time, help yourself to refreshments. Gentlemen! What catches your fancy here? Mm? This boy? Yes, open your mouth. Open, wider!

**John Biewen:** One more brilliantly grotesque scene from *12 Years a Slave*: A sale in Washington D.C. in 1841, showing typical pricing in the domestic slave trade at the time.

**Mr. Ford:** How much for the ones, Platt and Eliza?

**Dealer:** A thousand for Platt. Seven hundred for Eliza? My fairest price.

**John Biewen:** A thousand dollars, sometimes more, for one healthy male slave in the 1840s. Ed Baptist says today, depending on how you calculate inflation, that purchase price could equal more than a quarter million dollars, obviously an investment that only a few could afford. So, for slaveholding oligarchs, a big share of their wealth was in captive human beings themselves.

**Ed Baptist:** Large slave owners are the wealthiest class of people in the United States. You start to get some industrial magnates and merchants who are profiting from the growth of U.S. capitalism in other ways, you start to see them from the 1830s on. But they're sort

of joining an existing class of wealthy Americans, who to a large extent were composed of the wealthiest U.S. slave owners.

**John Biewen:** As a category of property, enslaved black people were the second most valuable capital asset in the United States, second only to the land itself. They made up one-fifth of the nation's total wealth in 1850.

### **[Music]**

**John Biewen:** For three generations, from independence to the Civil War, if you watch what powerful Americans did, rather than listening to the nation's most noble stated ideals, it seems undeniable: This was a country far more interested in building wealth – for some – than in democracy. It's a gross understatement to say Indigenous and enslaved black people were not included as members of the national family. America brutally victimized them. And yes, meanwhile, all women are denied full citizenship and most civil rights, and will be for many more decades. But what about democracy among the people the United States was ostensibly built for? The men who were called white?

**Keri Leigh Merritt:** Sure, my name is Keri Leigh Merritt. I'm a historian and writer who lives in Atlanta, Georgia. My first book was called *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*.

**John Biewen:** Keri Leigh Merritt's work focuses on a group that's usually overlooked in stories about America before the Civil War: Poor white people. Enslaved black people made up about half the population in the Deep South cotton states. Merritt divides the free white population into three broad groups.

**Keri Leigh Merritt:** About one third of whites were in families that owned slaves. So these are, you know, very, very high class, high net worth individuals. Then there's about a third of white people who are either yeoman farmers, people that owned their own land and perhaps even owned a slave or two, or merchants and lawyers and kind of the burgeoning middle class. And then the final third, I argue, are these poor whites, these people that are trapped in cyclical poverty that are never able to get out. The men have to compete with brutalized, enslaved labor, and so they're constantly moving around,

trying to find work. And this creates fractured family lives where women are actually heading poor white households for much of the year.

**John Biewen:** Keri Leigh is quick to say you can't compare the experience of poor Southern whites to that of enslaved black people. But, she says, the ruling class's decision to use slave labor left poor white men with no place in the Southern economy. It wasn't just that enslaved people did all the agricultural work – which, if not for slavery, would have been a main source of jobs for uneducated white men. The white elite relied on enslaved people for most other work, too: carpentry and blacksmithing, weaving and clothes washing, even building railroads.

**Keri Leigh Merritt:** So poor whites are the outgroup, out of whites, right? Because yeomen, in the middle, the middling classes actually have much more in common with slave holders. They have, all of their economic and political beliefs are pretty much in line with slave holders. But poor whites are the outliers. They're the people that are

they're constantly causing trouble, whether it's through interacting with slaves or, you know, again, just through their own poverty.

Getting drunk, getting wild and rowdy, not voting the way people want them to vote.

**[Music]**

**John Biewen:** That last possibility, that poor white men might vote their own interests and not those of the slaveholding plutocrats, actually didn't happen much, Merritt says. For one thing, you couldn't run for office in the antebellum South without the okay of the ruling, slave-holding elites.

**Keri Leigh Merritt:** They run the elections. They hand-pick the politicians who are all, you know, usually smaller slave holders or people who are just getting into slavery, becoming slave holders themselves.

**John Biewen:** So, if poor whites have dreams of voting for someone who will improve the plight of poor white men, well, it's rare that any such candidate is on the ballot. Besides, some states denied voting rights to

poor white men through property requirements well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. North Carolina was the last state to do away with its property requirement in 1856. Merritt says other barriers to voting included poll taxes—they were usually more than a day's wages for a poor worker; and residency requirements, a real problem if you're a struggling laborer who's often on the move.

**Keri Leigh Merritt:** And so there are myriad ways that slaveholders were able to disenfranchise poor whites. But the ones that they didn't disenfranchise, they basically just gathered up on election day. They got 'em really, really drunk, you know, fed them barbecue, gave them meat, you know, a luxury, and took them to the polls. And they're literally voting in front of every powerful man, every slaveholder in the county. There's no secrecy in voting at that time. Everyone can see exactly who you're voting for. Your name is literally written down under the candidate. And so, of course, they're voting the ways that the slave holders want them to vote.

**[MUSIC]**



**John Biewen:** So Chenjerai, that is really not a functioning democracy, is it. I mean, even for white men. If you're excluding a whole class of people, at least in one major region of the country.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Naw. It's not. And I think the message from Keri Leigh Merritt's work, is important. Because what it shows is that the people who had real power in this country weren't just leveraging racism and sexism. I mean, they were definitely leveraging that, let's be clear. But the project of minority rule went even further, and disenfranchised even some of the people who you were like, oh, I thought these people were like part of the club! Poor white men. But it turns out they didn't bring anything to the table that the ruling class wanted at that point. Not even their labor that the plutocrats would want to exploit, because they had unpaid, enslaved labor at their disposal.

**John Biewen:** Exactly. And that leads us back to the big-picture takeaway from this episode. Going back to that spectrum Woody Holton talked about, that the framers of the Constitution took as a given: More democracy will get you less capital investment and less economic growth, but \*less\* democracy will allow for more of those things by keeping regular working

people, and their wishes for a better life, under control. So if that's the assumption at work, look at how things went during this period. Look at the choices that the powerful people made.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** I mean, it's so stark. And I get that when we revisit this period it just feels like we're just focusing on, 'slavery was bad' and there's like these ethical failures. But I think there's a really specific lesson that we gotta learn. More wealth for a few folks didn't move the country toward greater democracy and freedom for most people. Right? The wealth actually sent us way far in the other direction. They doubled down on the genocidal removal of Native American people, and intensified the use of African people as unpaid labor. And, yeah, money came in, including investment from banks in places like New York, London, Amsterdam, and banks chartered by the U.S. and state governments. But that was because people saw the opportunity to turn the United States into this vast cotton-production machine, at the *expense* of democracy.

**John Biewen:** And you can still get pushback from people if you say that the U.S. economy was built on the backs of enslaved workers. People who'll say, 'no, no, no, slavery was an inefficient and unprofitable system,

and that's why it went away.' When in fact, as we've seen, it was enormously profitable.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, I hear that all the time. And it's like, listen, if it was so unprofitable, why were powerful people in the South so desperate to keep slavery that they were ready to secede from the nation? Why fight a bloody war that costs hundreds of thousands of lives, all to do something that doesn't make anybody any money? It's kind of a ridiculous take.

**John Biewen:** And of course it wasn't just profitable for Southern planters. The cotton produced by enslaved people played a huge role in kickstarting the American industrial economy—and, what we haven't talked about in the episode up to now, the consumer economy. Tens of thousands of people went to work in those cotton mills in the northeast, almost all of them white, a lot of them immigrants. They worked long hours and weren't paid much, but those jobs did put some money in people's pockets. And so businesses sprouted in those mill towns to sell stuff to those workers, everything from hats and shoes to, you know, pots and pans and other stuff for their homes.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah. Everything was getting great for white people, right?

**John Biewen:** (Laughs.) Well....

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Right, yeah, I mean not actually much better. The mill towns are more romantic in our memory than they were in real life, and there's a reason why there was a labor movement. But when I think about what politicians were selling people, it was the idea that they were fighting for opportunities for the common man. And some things did get a little better for white folks. You know you just think about people Andrew Jackson and this whole idea of "Jacksonian democracy."

**John Biewen:** Jacksonian democracy, and we need to talk about that a little bit in this episode. Andrew Jackson, seventh president, he's the guy who defeated John Quincy Adams in 1828, he was president through 1836.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** And there's still these people who celebrate Jackson. The idea is he was this great populist champion of the common man, who expanded voting rights for *white* men, and made America more

democratic. Right? But what you have to deal with is the fact he was a vicious racist, a slaveholder who was completely supportive of slavery and the domestic slave trade that Ed Baptist was talking about. And he spearheaded the violent removal of Native American people from their lands. I mean, the Trail of Tears and all that kind of stuff was his doing. And he was actually, after the American Revolution, the single biggest contributor to the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Indigenous people.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, that pretty much sums him up. And yet, apparently it's also true that his appeals on behalf of the so-called "common man," the common white man, had some impact. He railed against the new capitalist plutocrats, including bankers. And during his time as president, voting rights for white men were expanded in many states. I want to play one more clip from Ed Baptist, who we heard from a lot in this episode. Ed told me Jackson was an early version, if not the originator, of a certain "type" in American politics.

**Ed Baptist:** This political actor who claims to be for the little people, for the ordinary man, let's say, but really represents a kind of an

aggrieved whiteness that is demanding the protection of white men's ability to use violence to get what they want. This particular political archetype, you know, really resonates repeatedly throughout U.S. history. And we see it for the first time in the 1830s.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, the first time but not the last time. You see guys like this in future periods, right? You saw it in Reconstruction, in the late 1800s, people like Ben Tillman shutting down the political rights of black people. And in the 20th century with politicians like George Wallace, defending segregation. I mean, thinking about now, you almost don't even have to say it, because I know everybody's thinking it.

**John Biewen:** Yeah. And isn't it interesting that within a few days of becoming president, Donald Trump had hung Andrew Jackson's portrait prominently in the Oval Office.

**John Biewen:** In our next episode: Chenjerai, you mentioned Reconstruction, the period of dramatic democratic experimentation after the Civil War. Some have called it America's second founding. ...

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Turns out some people didn't like that much.

**John Biewen:** Democracy's "brief moment in the sun." Next time.

**John Biewen:** We love to hear from you via Twitter or Facebook. I tweet @sceneonradio. Chenjerai is @catchatweetdown. That's right, catch a tweet down. We appreciate your ratings and reviews on Apple Podcasts or wherever you're listening. They helps more people find us.

Our editor on the series is Loretta Williams. Research help on this episode from Anna Cassell. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our theme song is The Underside of Power by Algiers. Other music this season by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. Thanks to our voice actors: Scott Huler, Lawrence Baldine, Dan Partridge, Bill Bamberger, and Tom Rankin. And thanks to North Carolina Public Radio-WUNC. *Scene on Radio* is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.